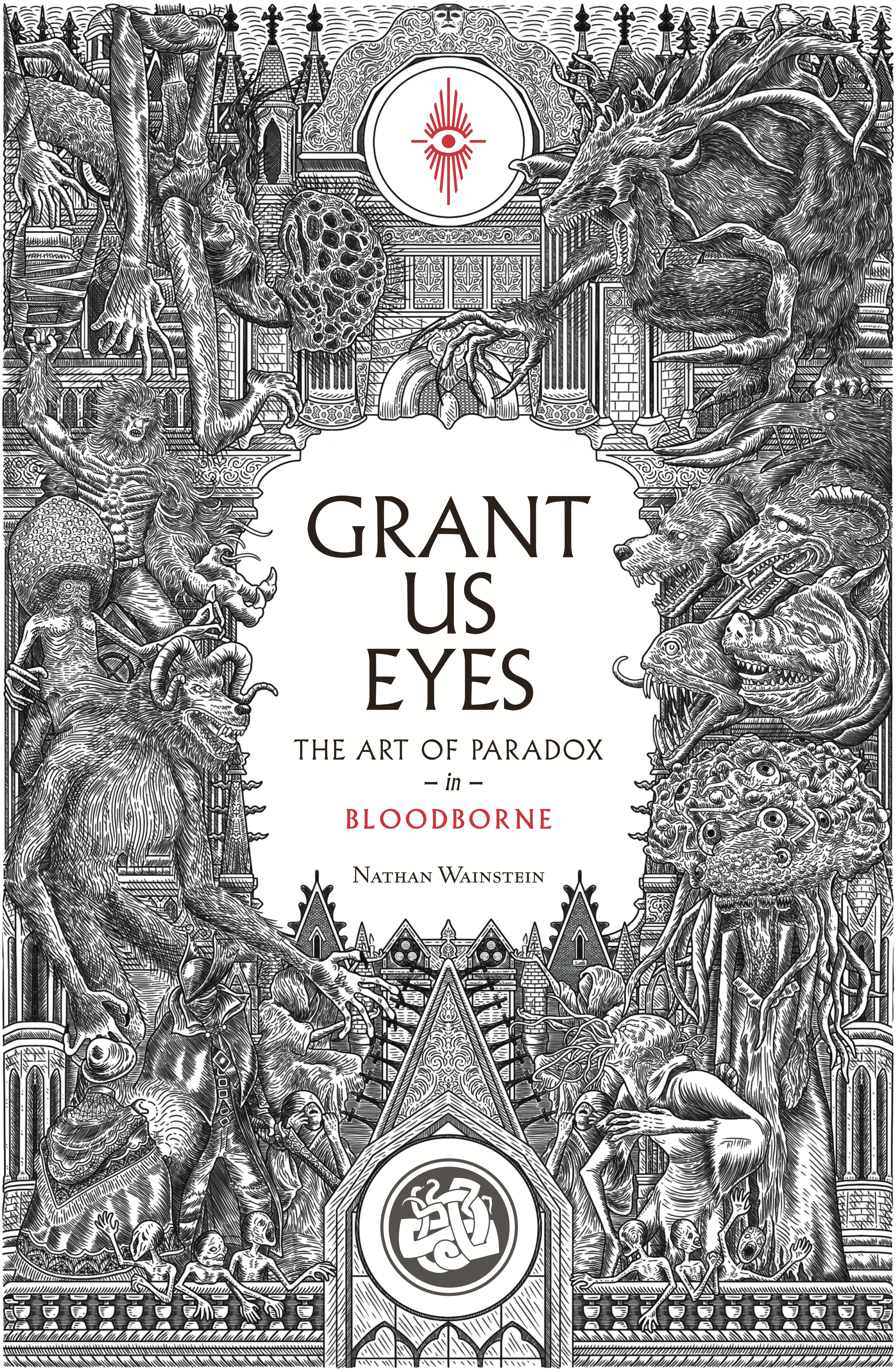

GRANT US EYES

THE ART OF PARADOX
– in –
BLOODBORNE

NATHAN WAINSTEIN

GRANT US EYES

"As you once did for the vacuous Rom,
grant us eyes, grant us eyes.
Plant eyes on our brains, to cleanse
our beastly idiocy."
- Micolash

Tune & Fairweather, 2025

Text © Nathan Wainstein

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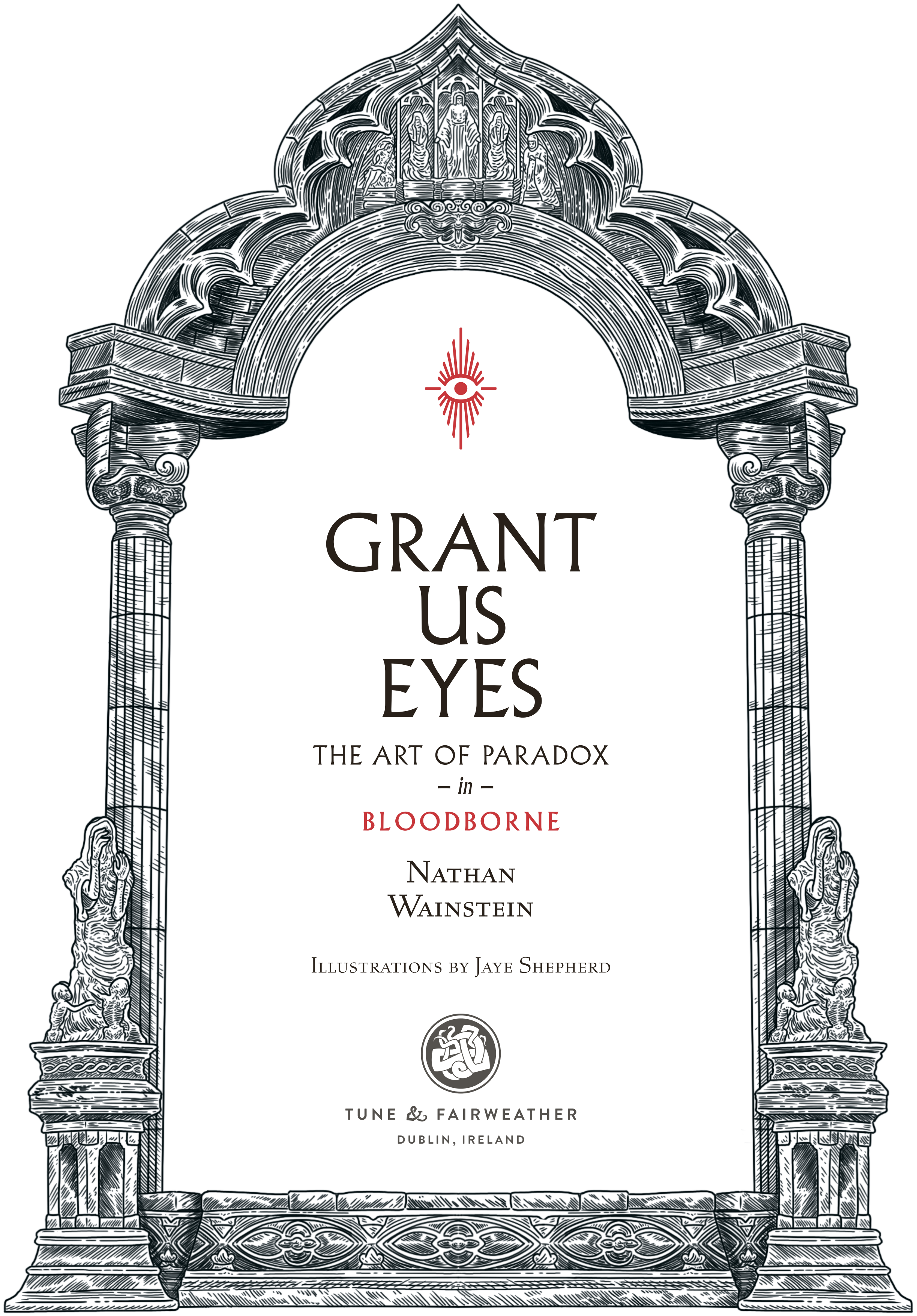

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NATHAN WAINSTEIN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAYE SHEPHERD

TUNE & FAIRWEATHER
DUBLIN, IRELAND

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SEEK THE OLD BLOOD

INTRODUCTION

On Negative Form

INTRODUCTION

My first experience of FromSoftware's Souls series was defined by an impression of wrongness.[1] Not wrongness in the sense of confusion – whether at the game's inscrutable RPG systems or its equally confounding narrative – nor, indeed, of alienation at the uniquely surreal sights of its 3D fantasy world, nor even of frustration at the legendary difficulty of its third-person melee combat.

My awareness of these negative features, each of them foundational to the series' design and crucial to its aesthetic power, would come later. Rather, my first impression was of a wrongness that seemed to verge constantly on actual artistic failure. Why were the graphics so ugly? Why were all the environmental textures either blurry or weirdly shiny? Why was the movement so sluggish? Why was the writing so ponderous and stilted? Why did my avatar's outfits look so dumb? Moreover, even as I progressed further and began to fall under the game's spell; even when, as a literary scholar trained in modernism, I quickly warmed to the game's coldness, and learned to appreciate its resolute disregard for the player's generic expectations, their comfort, even their pleasure; in short, even when the game's profound negative force in every aspect of its design began to seem like an artistic virtue, I still couldn't shake the feeling that some of the same things I *liked* about the game were, deep down, nothing other than flaws masquerading as progressive violations of gaming convention. For instance, was the game's unusually piecemeal way of telling its story – accomplished not through filmic cutscenes or dialogue as in other games, but instead through short item descriptions that are not only deeply ambiguous but often contradictory – merely masking a fundamentally incoherent plot? Was its spatially disjunctive gameworld genuinely surreal or just shoddily constructed? And if the game's notoriously challenging boss fights – on which I might spend hours, if not days, failing repeatedly – were "tough but fair," as Souls advocates often claim, then why were my enemies able

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[1] Throughout this book, I will use the word "series" to refer to the Soulsborne titles – the *Dark Souls* games plus *Demon's Souls* and *Bloodborne* – even though each of the latter two takes place in its own fictional universe. Because the games share so many mechanical and thematic elements, the series label remains appropriate (and convenient).

Bloodborne is distinct among the Souls games for its Gothic horror and Lovecraftian influences.

to hit me through walls? The more I played, the more I began to suspect that the game's compelling deviance – the difficulty and surreality and reticence that made it, for all its goofy wizards and skeletons, resemble nothing so much as a work of modernist art – and its incorrigible brokenness were two sides of the same coin: that the distinctive feature of the Souls aesthetic was in fact a kind of generalized negativity that oscillates indeterminately between modernist perversity and sheer technical failure. This book reflects upon that experience of ambiguous negativity through a step-by-step close reading of the greatest Souls game: 2015's Gothic-horror masterpiece *Bloodborne*.

Why attend so closely to what feels wrong when we could be appreciating all the things that *Bloodborne* – doubtless one of the finest games ever made – does right? The first answer is simple: because from a certain highly traditional perspective, its wrongness is precisely the mark of its greatness. For over a century, our culture's most authoritative frameworks for understanding art have centered on what I will call *negative form*: aspects of a work that discomfit, confuse, or alienate, that break rules, that violate our normal ways of making sense of or enjoying art, that challenge our pre-given ideas about space, time, tonal harmony, coherence, beauty, narrative closure, representation, language, or meaning. Examples of this widespread elevation of negative form are found across all domains of artistic production and cultural analysis. In the early 20th century, the Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky argued, influentially, that art's chief power is one of *estrangement*, of making even the most familiar things in the world seem alien. The German philosopher and cultural theorist Theodor Adorno held that dissonance, the opposite of musical harmony, is in fact "the truth about harmony," and hence a core value of modern music. [2] In 1930, the British literary critic William Empson published an entire book arguing that *ambiguity*, normally something one might try to avoid in one's writing, is not only artistically "good" but indeed forms the essence of good poetry, even when a poem is so ambiguous that it outright contradicts itself. The critic George Steiner held that the most important modern literary works are *difficult*. Similarly, the French theorist Roland Barthes believed the most "blissful" kind of text to be that which "imposes a state of loss … unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories" and "brings to a crisis his relation with language." [3] Cubist painters in the early 20th century argued that the classical laws of perspective dictating the organized, rational representation of space in fact distort the fragmented, multilayered manner by which we really perceive visual phenomena. The philosopher Henri Bergson made similar claims about our experience of time – arguments that may have gone on to influence the temporally nonlinear novels of modernist writers like Marcel Proust and William Faulkner. Deconstructionist critics in the 1970s and '80s thought that the best way to appreciate art was to show where its meaning fails, where its form collapses or turns in on itself. Likewise, trauma theory – a psychoanalytic framework for interpreting narrative that's now widely applied both to individual lives and to the collective experiences of entire nations and peoples – holds that it is precisely where narrative form *breaks down*, where it stutters, or repeats, or where space and time cease to make sense, that trauma becomes expressible. All of these theories and traditions have important differences, of course. But they're nonetheless united in their belief that the *negative moment* – that

ROLAND BARTHES

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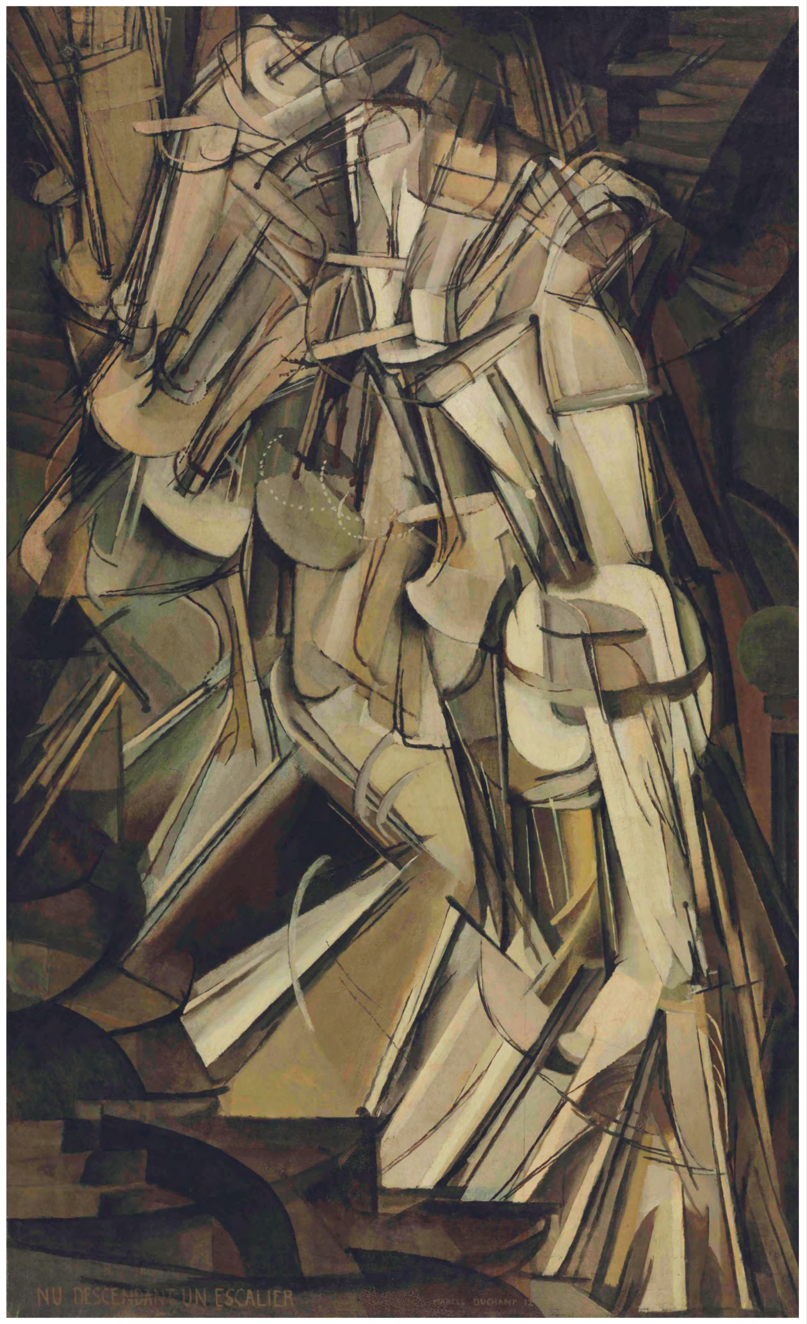
[2] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 110.
[3] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 14.

wherein the artwork becomes in some way wrong, weird, difficult, or contradictory – is also the site of its greatest power, beauty, fascination, or truth.

And yet, here a skeptic may want to ask: can't ambiguity also be an authorial failing? Can't difficulty also arise when someone's prose isn't clear, or when their tone is excessively harsh or discordant, or when their images are simply confused? Can't narrative contradiction happen when a story is just poorly plotted? The analyst of negative form overlooks such commonsense objections at their own risk. Indeed, a rarely acknowledged paradox of this entire modern conception of negative form is precisely that it ends up elevating those features that, were one willing to risk vulgarity to say it, might otherwise seem like simple faults of craft.[4] Most of us know this instinctively: perhaps from one's own necessarily imperfect attempts at writing or making art, or perhaps from that foundational experience of seeing one's first abstract painting and puzzling over its resemblance to the work of a child. Despite its obviousness, however, professional interpreters of art have tended, especially in recent decades, to repress this fundamental ambiguity of negative form, and to treat it as an artistic good in itself. This has even led critics into occasional bouts of bad faith, where they draw great meaning from a contradiction, indeterminacy, or stylistic rupture in an artwork that they know deep down to be nothing more than a random lapse. (Erica McAlpine has recently shown that poetry scholars have long indulged in this practice even when confronted with basic spelling mistakes in

[4] I explore the disturbing resemblance between modernist experimentation and simple writerly failure within a more academic context in my unpublished PhD dissertation, "Unformed Art: Bad Writing in the Modernist Novel" (Stanford, 2020), and my in-progress book manuscript, *Bad Writing in the Modernist Novel.*



Marcel Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) depicts multiple moments in time simultaneously. It also looks a bit like a video-game glitch.

canonical poems.)[5] On the most general level, *Grant Us Eyes* thus seeks to reopen this primary ambiguity of negative form (we might say: to dwell on it as such) by attending to various instances of it within an exemplary work, *Bloodborne*, in which the two faces of this ambiguity – is it technical sophistication or shoddiness? experimentalism or error? generative difficulty or simple disorganization? – are particularly hard to separate.

An exemplary work – or an entire medium? This question brings us to the second reason for focusing on negative form. For if it's true that *Bloodborne* possesses in spades many of the negative features we have learned to value – difficulty, obscurity, ugliness, narrative fragmentation and ambiguity, an excess of repetition, a nonlinear and confusing timeline, spatial distortion and contradiction – we must also recognize that many of these same features are inherent either to video games in general or to the larger genre to which *Bloodborne* belongs (the 3D action-RPG). Games are rich in negative form *by default*. Whereas, for instance, only the most experimental narrative texts embrace extreme repetition – Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet or Samuel Beckett – most video games are deeply repetitive by necessity, staging the same scenarios over and over in flagrant violation of traditional narrative economy,[6] and obliging the player to perform identical actions (jumping, killing, picking up items) hundreds if not thousands of times.[7]

Or take difficulty – likely the feature for which *Bloodborne*, like the rest of the Souls series, is best known among players. On the one hand, few would contest that *Bloodborne* is harder than the average action game. Your avatar can survive only two or three hits from the crazed villagers, werewolves, mutant dogs, and eldritch monstrosities with which they do battle; dying resurrects most enemies in the gameworld and robs you of all your currency while giving you only one chance to retrieve it; and perhaps most cruelly, whatever mistakes you make are genuinely permanent – a rarity for the gaming medium today – due to the fact that the game autosaves constantly without allowing you to load earlier save states. Like the other Souls games, *Bloodborne* doesn't even let you pause. In its difficulty, *Bloodborne* might thus be said to bear a relation to the standard mass-market action game analogous to that which a modernist novel like *Ulysses* bears to a novel by Dan Brown. (Indeed, like much high modernist art, the Souls games have often been accused of elitism – a complaint we will examine in more detail later.) At the same time, however, the obtrusive difficulty of a game like *Bloodborne* should not distract us from that fact that nearly all video games are difficult, insofar as active opposition to the player's progress is a fundamental aspect of the form.[8] Even when they're easy, games fight the player in a way that most novels or films do not, threatening them constantly with backtracking and repetition upon failure, or forcing them to complete tests of skill just to see what will happen next in a story.[9] Here a distinctive feature of avant-garde artistic traditions – resistance – thus again becomes a baseline component of the medium.

---

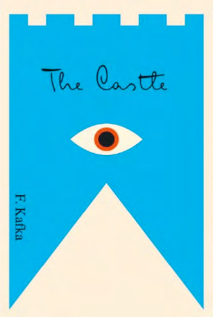
[5] See Erica McAlpine, *The Poet's Mistake*.

[6] As Barthes observes, "It may be that men ceaselessly reinject into narrative what they have known, what they have experienced; but if they do … it is in a form which has vanquished repetition" ("Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," 294-95).

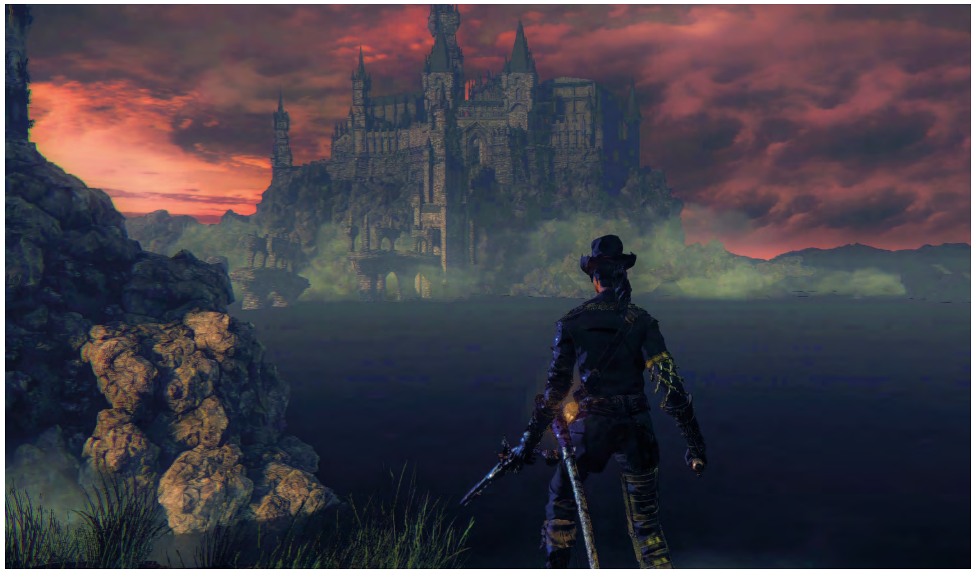
[7] On the "gamelike" (because repetitive) form of 2666, see Steven Poole's essay "The Grind" in *Trigger Happy 2.0: The Art and Politics of Videogames*.

[8] Patrick Jagoda makes a similar point in *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification*, noting that the gaming medium "depends, fundamentally and in a variety of senses, on difficulty," and that "At the most basic level, any game depends on artificially designed obstacles to which it invites players to attend and respond via mechanics, procedures, and processes" (191). On the centrality of difficulty and failure to the experience of playing video games, see also Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*.

FRANZ KAFKA



Or consider the similar case of representation. In their depictions of reality, video games are "modernist" by default. [10] In the earliest games, technical limitations meant that gameworlds were abstract long before they were realistic. Yet even with the advent of 3D graphics and the dizzying improvements in rendering technology over the past 25 years, video game worlds, with their vast empty spaces, floating architecture, and endlessly repeating graphical assets, still verge frequently on mimetic abstraction, or failing that, at least a kind of naturalized surrealism. For even in the most graphically advanced, lavishly rendered 3D gameworlds of today, one still finds the classical laws of Newtonian space-time everywhere "exploded," as Adorno would say, by "small acts of sabotage." [11] Here Adorno is writing about a disorienting moment in Kafka's *The Castle*, in which the protagonist K, upon setting out from a village at morning, witnesses night fall abruptly and far too soon. In *The Castle* this is an experimental flourish, a sign of what Adorno calls Kafka's "expressionism." In video games, however, such radical distortions of time happen in almost every open-world game with a day-night cycle, wherein the sun and moon race visibly overhead and a full day lasts for about 30 minutes. [12] And this is merely one example of the medium's pervasive disruption of "realistic" temporality. Indeed, the opposite distortion is no less common and just as strange: a world with no passing time whatsoever, or one in which time of day is wedded rigorously to location, such that night falls in *Final Fantasy IX* whenever you approach the city of Treno, while the village of Cosmo Canyon in *Final Fantasy VII* lies beneath a perpetual sunset.



Cainhust Castle looms in the distance. In Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, the protagonist K spends much of the novel trying to reach the titular castle, which is visible from afar yet remains stubbornly inaccessible.

And as with time, so with space. Taken literally, even the most realistic game spaces are disjointed and hallucinatory. Think, for instance, of the bizarre compressions of the North American landscape in the otherwise photorealistic open worlds of *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *Death Stranding*, where one can walk across enormous swaths of the country in minutes. Or consider the following description of

[9] In *Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*, Poole characterizes the experience of many game narratives thus: "it is as if you were reading a novel and forced by some jocund imp at the end of each chapter to win a game of table tennis before being allowed to get back to the story" (104).

[10] On the default "modernism" of video game representation, see Tom Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*, 54, and Poole, Trigger Happy, 224. On visual abstraction in video games, see also Mark J. P. Wolf, "Abstraction in the Video Game."

[11] Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," 261

[12] In their article "Time in Video Games: A Survey and Analysis," José P. Zagal and Michael Mateas note the sped-up day/night cycle as one of the recurrent "temporal anomalies" that often characterize the "dissonant" experience of time in video games (854-55).

Orson Welles's 1962 film adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial* uses dramatic, Expressionist juxtapositions of light and shadow that would not be out of place in *Bloodborne.*

a church from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, in which a defamiliarizing, "avant-garde" distortion of realistic space comes to seem, from our anachronistic perspective, like a literal description of a video game world:

> *Beside [the road] a weathered church lifted its crazy steeple like a painted church, and the whole scene was as flat and without perspective as a painted cardboard set upon the ultimate edge of the flat earth, against the windy sunlight of space and April and a midmorning filled with bells.* [13]

WILLIAM FAULKNER

We can assume that Faulkner is thinking here of a theater or film set, but his description reads more accurately like an account of the outer edges of a video game map. For in theater or film, the 2D set enjoys a kind of ontological primacy: it loses its disorienting power precisely because accepting its "reality" is a basic condition of entering the work's represented world. The experience of space narrated above, however, derives its estranging power from its surreal, dynamic contrast to the normal ("realistic") 3D space that the characters have just traversed by walking up the road. Read in context, this passage describes not a 2D vision of the world but rather a sudden, hallucinatory confusion between this 2D vision and a competing 3D reality (what Faulkner calls the "the windy sunlight of space") that is fundamentally irreconcilable with it. And video games, more than any other medium, represent precisely this unstable border between opposed visions of space. This is one paradox of the most advanced 3D worlds of today. No matter their graphical prowess, there is very often a point, whether upon "the ultimate edge of the flat earth" or high up in the sky, when such worlds become 2D: when the exquisitely modeled clouds above give way to the flat “skybox” beyond (a literal roof of the 3D environment), or when the far edges of a dramatic mountain vista collide incongruously with flat, fake-looking textures at the world’s end. [14] Some games, like *Bloodborne*, hide this well; but others, like the recent *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, do not – leading to jarring situations like the one Faulkner describes above, in which a “realistic” experience of 3D space runs head-on into its very antithesis. Video games make modernist spacetime literal. [15]

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[13] Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 292.

Of course, to observe such parallels is not to suggest that video games should therefore be afforded a cultural status equal to that of works by Kafka or Faulkner. On the contrary, what’s remarkable is precisely that in games these classic varieties of negative form remain largely *unremarkable*, just game form as usual. Indeed, we might say they regain their notability – i.e., become perceptible as negative form as such – only in a game like *Bloodborne*, which exemplifies the gaming medium’s innate “modernism” by heightening its dissonances and distortions to a singular degree. For this reason, the varieties of negative form in *Bloodborne* explored in the chapters to follow will often constitute a *three-way* ambiguity, not only between artistic sophistication and failure, but also between either of these two poles and the inborn structural disjunctions of the gaming medium as a whole.

* * *

Let us now consider a concrete example of negative form that will help bring some of these strands together. This example occurs not in

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[14] For a philosophically suggestive reflection on the distinction between 3D and 2D in games, see Michael W. Clune, *Gamelife: A Memoir*, 59-60.

[15] In his discussion of video game worlds in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, Ian Bogost notes that the “confused relationship … [with] time and space” that can be found in games like *Grand Theft Auto III* or *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* is also “[o]ne of the characteristic features of modernism “(159-60).

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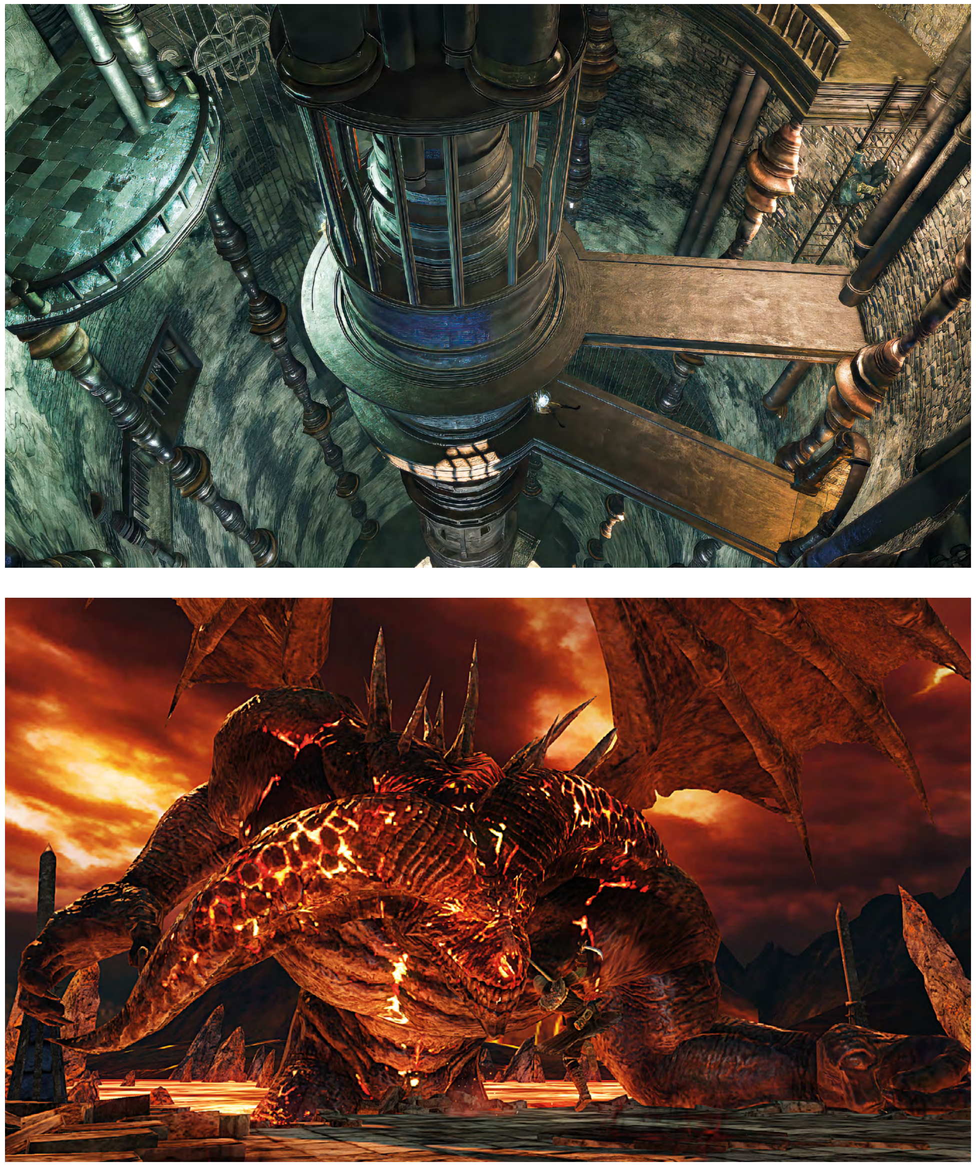

Souls games are renowned for their intricate arrangements of vertical space. But the transition between the Earthen Peak and the Iron Keep in *Dark Souls II* is an infamous misfire.

Bloodborne but in *Dark Souls II*, the former's immediate predecessor in FromSoftware's catalogue. The moment in question involves a radical distortion of realistic space. At a certain point in their journey across the fantasy kingdom of Drangleic, the player of *Dark Souls II* comes upon an enormous windmill set amid a swampy valley bordered by distant mountains. Entering the structure at its base, you fight your way through a horde of zombies, sorcerers, and haunted mannikins to the very top, where you discover, quite nonsensically, an elevator leading *upwards*, directly through what seemed from outside to be the windmill's roof. Riding this elevator, moreover, reveals an even more jarring spatial contradiction. For emerging from the lift into what should be, by any "realistic" measure, the empty sky above, you instead find yourself standing before a giant castle half-submerged in lava within the caldera of a towering volcano. Here the game's otherwise continuous spatial reality simply breaks down. There is no way to justify logically this seamless transition from the top of a windmill standing alone in a wide valley to a castle on a mountain summit. Further, this failure of realism is sharpened by the fact that forging elegant, surprising connections between locations within a continuous 3D gameworld is one of the Souls series' claims to fame. The first *Dark Souls* in particular constantly impresses the player with the way its locations fold back on themselves: its level design forces you to zigzag carefully through unknown territory before revealing – often precisely through an elevator – a surprising passage back to a known safe haven or a shortcut to a landmark that one would have thought to be miles away. *Dark Souls II*'s nonsensical elevator ride thus represents the series flubbing one of its own stylistic signatures, as if we were watching Faulkner mess up the grammar of a long sentence or Paul Thomas Anderson botch a one-shot set piece.

And yet, to begin at the maximally general level of the medium itself, we may note that this sort of spatial incoherence is not, in the abstract, especially rare. Due to the conventions

Although *Dark Souls II*'s varied environments are often seamlessly connected, spatial continuity from the player's perspective does not necessarily imply spatial coherence.

and stubborn technical limitations of 3D world design, it remains the case that in most gameworlds the exterior shape and orientation of a structure need not correspond in any strict sense to that of its interior, since that interior may not actually "exist" when you are looking at the structure from a distance, but rather will be loaded in as you approach or enter, while the surrounding exterior environment accordingly fades into nonexistence. Similarly, a seemingly wide-open outdoor setting – like that of the valley in which this windmill sits – is often, as we've already seen, in truth a kind massive "room" with a sky simply painted on the "ceiling," thus making it no *structural* contradiction whatsoever that one may pass through that sky-ceiling into a new "room" modeled on an entirely different natural environment.[16] In video games, spatial consistency between inside and outside, between the external appearance of an environment and the experience of actually navigating it, is itself often an illusion, an artful coherence-effect masking the fundamental unreality of a virtual space that has no structural obligation to obey physical laws. One might therefore say that this impossible transition in *Dark Souls II* simply makes explicit, and spectacular, the kind of spatial incoherence that happens all the time in games, and which is in fact a basic convention of their design. It performs what Viktor Shklovsky would call a "laying bare the device" of 3D world construction.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that this spatial contradiction is obtrusive, and moreover occurs without any apparent justification within the fictional universe. Even if we understand the structural conventions that may have enabled this contradiction, one might still wonder how the designers ever found such a blatant exposure

[16] One can see such a passage through the sky-ceiling literally occur – in all its hallucinatory strangeness – in SmoothAndSilkySouls's YouTube video on this moment in *Dark Souls II*, "How Iron Keep and Earthen Peak Connect (With no-clip and map viewer)."

of the gameworld's artificiality to be acceptable. Like any instance of genuine negative form, the contradiction challenges our default ways of making sense of the work in a way that demands explanation. What were the designers thinking? Is there some hidden artistic intention behind this choice? Is it a simple mistake? Or was there perhaps a structural necessity to this transition that the designers were unable to motivate? Indeed, following this last possibility, it has often been suspected that the designers of *Dark Souls II* were forced to reshuffle locations across the game's world map midway through development – a compositional contingency that would certainly explain the *relational* confusion of these two otherwise internally coherent environments. Perhaps the elevator leading to the volcano castle was supposed to be housed somewhere else in Drangleic; or perhaps it originally led *down*, to a transitional subterranean area (leading, we may imagine, to those mountains in the distance) that for whatever reason had to be removed from the game entirely.[17] Such patchwork solutions are common in the torturous development of blockbuster video games, whose worlds are often as grotesquely sutured together as any of *Bloodborne*'s undead monstrosities. This prosaic explanation would thus read *Dark Souls II*'s jarring spatial distortion as the unfortunate result of a belated, and perhaps necessarily haphazard, "revision" to the game's overall structure – one not unlike that which the French narratologist Gérard Genette, in his classic work *Narrative Discourse*, suggests may account

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[17] Commenters on Reddit have sometimes proposed having the elevator lead down instead of up as a workable fix for the bizarre transition. For instance, the user ZorazXIII writes: "I always thought it would have been cool if the elevator went down instead of up ... down past the entire height of Earthen Peak, down underground. Put a roof on Iron Keep and bam, underground magma castle." ZorazXIII, comment on "How come Iron Keep sit [sic] at the top of an elevator at Earthen Peak?" by tomishy0, Reddit, October 17, 2019 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://www.reddit.com/r/DarkSouls2/comments/dj6qgz/how_come_iron_keep_sit_at_the_top_of_an_elevator/.

for certain bewildering temporal contradictions in Proust's great novel *In Search of Lost Time*.[18]

Yet it is wholly typical of the modern critical attitude toward negative form that Genette ultimately reads those same Proustian distortions not as mistakes but rather as proof of the author's daring experimentalism, his wish to estrange the very structures of novelistic time and "to let them play for their own sake ... *to treat them in terms of music*."[19] Similarly, we should not at all be surprised, amid a critical culture that remains infatuated with the aesthetic potential of negative form, that *Dark Souls II*'s spatial contradiction has also been read as the game's greatest artistic triumph. Thus Austin Walker, in a 2019 episode of the terrific podcast *Waypoint Radio* (now *Remap Radio*), suggests that this distortion, in its very contradictoriness, gives a subtle yet vivid picture of the existential trauma suffered by Drangleic's inhabitants under imperial rule. The transition from windmill to volcano may be deeply confusing, but *Dark Souls II*, as Walker argues to his co-hosts, is also "*about* confusion":

> It is explicitly [a game] about the ways in which ... you lose touch with yourself, the ways in which an empire loses touch with the people within it. It is not a *mistake* that you take the elevator at the top of the windmill – which, one, is already a goofy fucking thing – and then you go *up* and reveal yourself to be in a new lava world, above the clouds, that is not connected to the ground in any way. They didn't *fuck up* – that wasn't a CinemaSin – you know what I mean? That was a decision about the surreality of imperial spaces.[20]

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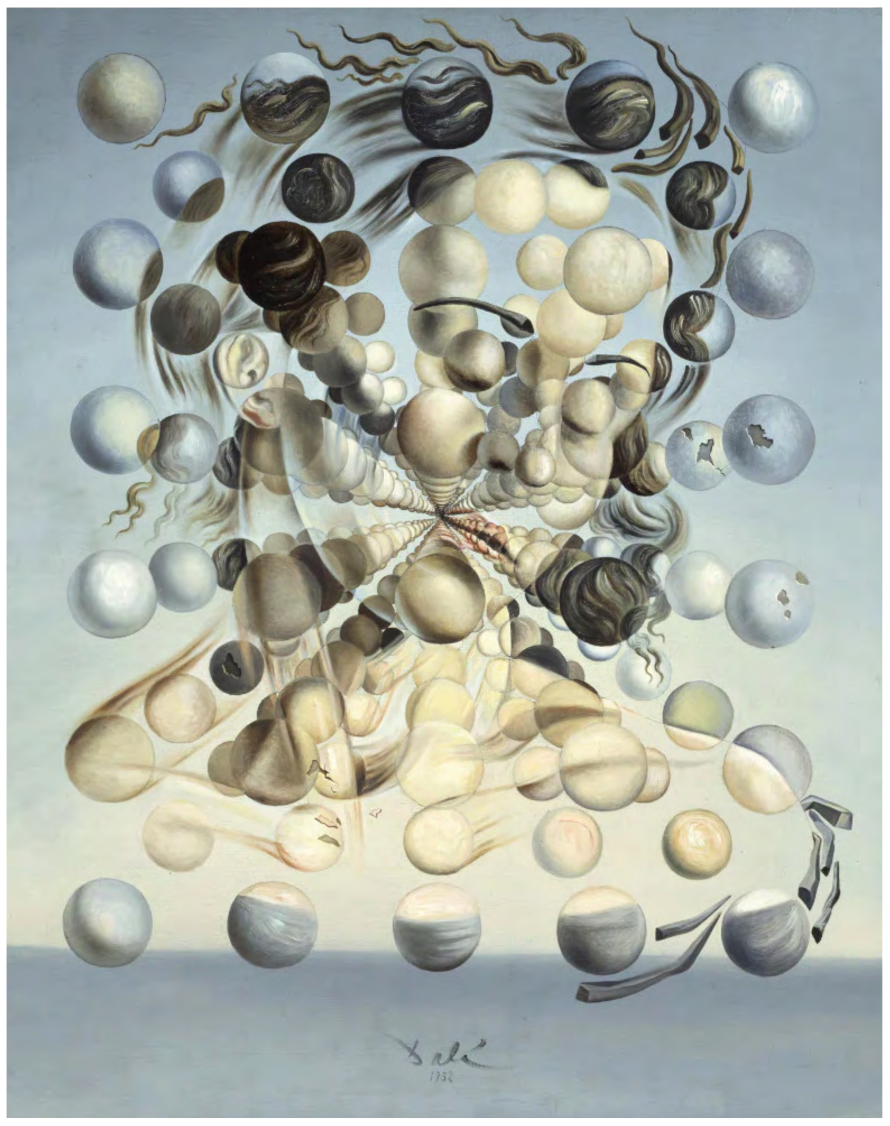
[18] See Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 121-23.

[19] Ibid., 155 (emphasis original).

[20] Austin Walker (host), with Ricardo Contreras, Patrick Klepek, and Rob Zacny, *Waypoint Radio*, "Our Favorite Dark Souls of the Decade," produced by Ricardo Contreras, VICE / Acast, December 27, 2019, 19:25–20:38 (edited for clarity and emphasis added).



Salvador Dali's surrealist paintings like *Galatea of the Spheres* (1952) often radically distort time and space while nevertheless maintaining a basic commitment to pictorial realism.

For all its winning off-the-cuff-ness, Walker's interpretation is emblematic of an entire attitude toward negative form. At first glance, this reading seems chiefly to exemplify a specialized critical framework that emerged only in the past four decades, namely postcolonial theory, which has sometimes suggested, along these same lines, that imperial rule can distort spacetime itself in the lives of subjugated peoples. Yet the fact that Walker calls this distortion "surreal" also indicates a basic alliance between this postmodern critical framework and an earlier, more general paradigm of modernist art. Modernism, after all, often sought to challenge our received ideas about what constitutes a realistic or truthful depiction of space and time in precisely this way. (Here we may think not only of Surrealism itself but also of Cubism and Expressionism). Moreover, the fact that what seems most artistically valuable to Walker is precisely what looks like a "fuck up" reveals a basic continuity in criticism's approach to negative form in general, one that holds not just between postmodern and modernist theory but also between otherwise disparate interpretive traditions dating back to antiquity. In the first century CE, for instance, the author known as Longinus wrote the following about a weird grammatical lapse in Homer's *Iliad*: "[Homer] forces and compels into unnatural union prepositions which are not easily joined together when he says *'from under death.'* He has tortured his line into conformity with the impending disaster, and by the compactness of his language he brilliantly represents the calamity and almost stamps upon the words the very shape of the peril." [21] In other words, what seems perhaps like a mere artistic fault – the bad grammar of the phrase "from under" in Greek – for Longinus in fact perfectly represents the "calamity" that's now happening in the poem: an assault by Hector that Homer, in the passage being cited, compares to a destructive wave at sea. The overlap with Walker's reading of *Dark Souls II* should be clear. In both cases, a jarring formal violation becomes expressive, in its very negativity, of a negative experience happening within the fiction (the terror of Hector's victims, the existential confusion of Drangleic's people). I want to suggest, in sum, that this redemptive approach to negative form represents a dominant strand of art-interpretation – one that begins in antiquity, but which has only become more widespread as modern art and theory have taught us to place more and more value on negative form in itself. From one angle, we might say that the critical analysis of art has been a long history of turning formal "bugs" into "features."[22]

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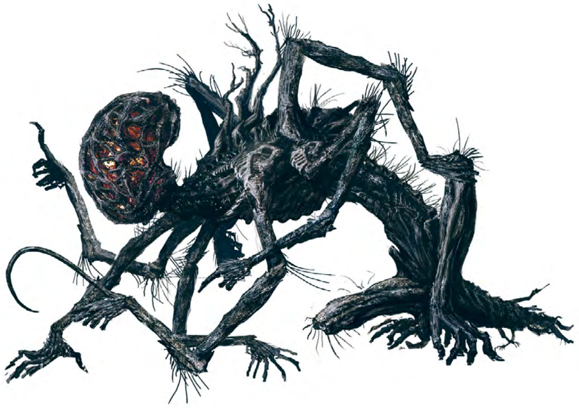
[21] Longinus, *On Great Writing*, 19. T. J. Clark discusses this passage in relation to modernist aesthetics in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, 314, 408.

But here we come to one last reversal of criticism's usual impulses produced by the gaming medium itself. For unlike other art forms, video games also have literal bugs – random accidents of code that may produce suggestive distortions of space, time, and realism of the kind we've been discussing, but which, when recognized as bugs, are uniquely hard to construe as anything other than meaningless failures of design. The literal bug or glitch, in other words, represents a kind of limit point for the critical redemption of negative form. Glitches in games may be funny, they may enable unforeseen gameplay advantages (as in speedrunning exploits or happy accidents like *Quake*'s famous "rocket-jumping" maneuver),[23] and they may even be celebrated aesthetically by "glitch artists" who recontextualize or mimic them in order to *simulate* technical failure (doubtless for the purpose of their own artistic success), much in the way that Samuel Beckett produced great novels by simulating their own stylistic and structural ineptitude. But within the scene of criticism glitches are uniquely resistant to artistic redemption, for the simple reason that interpretation presupposes necessity, and the glitch, by definition, is wholly accidental.[24] This resistance constitutes something of a paradox to the extent that glitches, in today's digitally saturated culture, are used increasingly by critics as a verbal figure for precisely those formal disruptions that – exactly *unlike* literal glitches – seem ambiguously poised between random lapses and meaningful deviations.[25] To cite one example among many, in his recent book on Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*, David Kurnick notes that the "coherence" of the novel's initial narrator, Juan Garcia Madero, starts to seem "glitchy" at the beginning of the novel's last act, as Madero and his friends drive through the Sonoran Desert in search of an enigmatic avant-garde poet. Yet what Kurnick really means is that this character becomes incoherent *in an aesthetically productive way*, and as such represents a typical instance of easily redeemable negative form: Madero's "glitchiness" stems from the unstable, confusing temporality of his diary entries, a characterological effect that Kurnick suggests replicates the increasing unreality of the narrative itself, which



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[22] On this phrase as a critical paradigm, see Wainstein, "Bugs and Features: On Video Game Glitches and Interpretation."

[23] On glitches in speedrunning and rocket-jumping, see Alex Pieschel's illuminating essay on the aesthetics and history of the video game glitch, "Glitches: A Kind of History."

[24] In *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, Frank Kermode notes that "interpretation abhors the random" (9).

[25] I myself have used "glitch" in this way. See Wainstein, "Faulkner's Glitches."

transfigures the novel from a work of "urban realism" into a kind of abstract allegory or fable.[26]

Yet if the glitch, in this case, seems indeed like an apt figure for those fleeting, microscopic negative moments upon which criticism often feeds, the interpretive challenges posed by actual glitches become equally clear in another recent study of negative form: D. A. Miller's *Hidden Hitchcock*. Miller's book attends in exquisite detail to beguiling moments of negative form in Alfred Hitchcock's films – continuity errors, random cuts, and other violations of cinematic "good style" – that seem, despite their apparent accidentalness, stubbornly rich with meaning. *Hidden Hitchcock* is thus an important reference point for the present book not only for its subtle, compelling analyses of negative form, but also for its unusually frank and thorough attention to negative form's essential ambiguity, its disturbing resemblance to random error. *Hidden Hitchcock* is both about the artistic power of Hitchcock's weird stylistic breakdowns and about the strange critical compulsion to imbue those breakdowns with artistic power in the first place – a compulsion that for Miller, the best close reader alive, at times verges on a mania.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

Tellingly, however, there is one negative moment in *Hidden Hitchcock* that even Miller struggles to recuperate. This is a random, nearly imperceptible cut near the end of *Rope* that Miller concludes can only be explained as a physical accident – or what he explicitly calls a "glitch" – that befell the film during post-production. This glitch lives up to its name by being frustratingly resistant to meaning: indeed, for Miller it images nothing less than the interpreter's own "death."[27]

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[26] Kurnick, *The Savage Detectives Reread*, 158-60.
[27] Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock*, 96-98.

Despite being mechanical rather than digital in nature, this random breakdown thus expresses the truth of the glitch (the word itself seems to have originated either in radio broadcasting or space aeronautics) by countering the critic's attention even as it attracts it.[28] In video games, the presence of literal glitches is thus one more way in which the medium frustrates criticism by offering a purified version of the negative form upon which it usually fixates. If much of today's critical interpretation can be described as reading for the glitch – a hunt for those negative moments that disrupt, disorient, and estrange our habitual perception of a work – the paradox of literal glitches is to void close reading itself.

* * *

Accordingly, *Grant Us Eyes* is an experiment in close reading that also reflects, at times, on the very possibility of close reading. My title, taken from the chanted refrain of the crazed scholar Micolash, is meant to suggest this twofold emphasis on reading, while also gesturing toward one of *Bloodborne*'s many paradoxes. Although certain denizens of the game's Gothic city of Yharnam renounce physical eyesight in order to gain eldritch "insight" – or what, in an uncanny literalization of this word, they call "eyes on the inside"[29] – they nevertheless behave as if they could still see. "Eyes on the inside" thus also seems to mean eyes on the outside (or "outsight," if you will), yet at the same time, Micolash's very refrain implies that he, along with the rest of "us," remain blinded both inside and out. This shifting interplay between interior and exterior, vision and occlusion, or what the literary scholar Paul de Man called "Blindness

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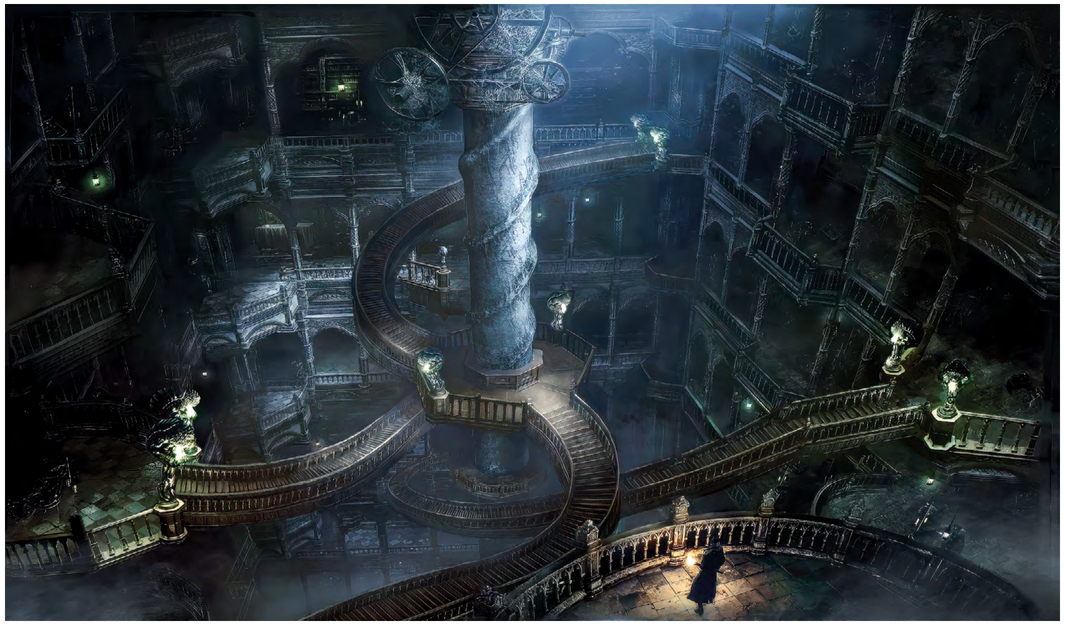
[28] On the etymology of the word *glitch*, see Ben Zimmer, "The Hidden History of 'Glitch.'"
[29] Item description, One Third of Umbilical Cord.



Bloodborne's Research Hall – one of the most brilliantly designed levels in the series – transitions nonsensically from the summit of a clock tower to a fishing village. But since it's located in a dream world, it's okay.

and Insight" (a title that would form an apt tagline for *Bloodborne* itself!), exemplifies the sort of paradoxical detail that will occupy this book.[30]

The chapters that follow proceed in roughly chronological order, beginning with *Bloodborne*'s opening cutscene and ending with its concluding one. Each of these chapters highlights a different moment or mode of negative form. Some will be familiar and intuitive: the fragmentation and occasional incoherence of *Bloodborne*'s plot, the difficulty of its combat, the strangeness of its soundscape, the abrupt and inconclusive nature of its endings. Some will be more abstract, taking the concept of negative form in the widest sense. One chapter considers the classical aesthetic category of the sublime (which the philosopher Immanuel Kant called a "negative pleasure") in relation to *Bloodborne*'s simultaneously wondrous and terrifying digital environment. Others touch upon the inherent weirdness of its Gothic genre – a fictional mode that Madelon Hoedt, in another book-length study of *Bloodborne* to which I'll occasionally make reference, suggests is already characterized by spatial and temporal disjunction.[31] Many of these chapters will, in fact, hinge on the construction of digital space in particular: for not only are video games an essentially spatial medium,[32] but Souls games, and *Bloodborne* especially, are defined both by their incredibly intricate arrangements of continuous space and by the jarring distortions that make that space, in so many ways, deeply uncanny. Throughout all of this, I will try to keep open as much as possible the basic artistic ambiguity of negative form. Final judgments, to the extent I offer them, will vary. Some of the distortions and deviations will be read – in accordance with critical tradition – as unqualified artistic successes, others will appear more ambivalent or conflicted, while still others may seem ultimately like outright faults. In every case, though, the goal will be to make newly perceptible the complexity and paradoxicality of *Bloodborne*'s negative force as it's actually experienced.

In foregrounding this ambiguity, *Grant Us Eyes* diverges not only from traditional academic analyses of art, but also from the numerous lore-focused deep dives produced by the Souls community. Although I find many of these works fascinating – especially Redgrave's splendid *Paleblood Hunt*, itself a triumph of close reading that I will draw from frequently – this book differs from your typical lore analysis in that it does not assume a hidden artistic intention behind *Bloodborne*'s many narrative contradictions, ambiguities, and loose ends.[33] I'm aware that this may put me at odds with certain Souls fans. In dwelling on *Bloodborne*'s apparent storytelling and game-design sins, I may even seem disturbingly aligned with the fanatical Alfred, Hunter of Vilebloods, a soldier of *Bloodborne*'s Healing Church obsessed with rooting out blasphemy and impurity. Alfred, of course, comes to a bad end. Midway through the game, this cheerful Healing Church zealot reveals his wish to find Queen Annalise, the leader of the Vileblood sect whose life-preserving practices "threaten the purity of the Church's blood healing." As it turns out, Annalise herself is also one of the game's most notorious artistic "impurities." Despite her intriguing interactions with a difficult secret boss and a supremely rare item (one I myself have never managed to obtain despite logging almost 200 hours in *Bloodborne*), she possesses few meaningful gameplay functions, leading some to suspect that she was once part of a more complex questline that was left unfinished.[34] Alfred's violent murder of

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[30] See Paul de Man's classic collection of critical essays, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism.*

[31] See Hoedt, *Narrative Design and Authorship in Bloodborne: An Analysis of the Horror Videogame*, 19, 262-63. Hoedt derives this understanding of the Gothic mode from Fred Botting's *Gothic* (2013).

[32] As Espen Aarseth writes in his essay "Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Computer Games, "The defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation, and therefore a classification of computer games can be based on how they represent – or, perhaps, *implement* – space" (154). Quoted in Hoedt, *Narrative Design and Authorship in Bloodborne*, 173.

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[33] See Redgrave, *The Paleblood Hunt: A Bloodborne Analysis*. The author, a Reddit user with the name dmcredgrave, made this 107-page masterpiece of Souls lore analysis freely available as a Google Doc in 2015. The document – which I will cite frequently – can be accessed from dmcredgrave's original post: "The Paleblood Hunt - Finalized and revised with both new and old theories. 108 pages on Bloodborne's Lore, Characters, History, and World," Reddit, December 3, 2015 (accessed August 22, 2024), https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/3vaq4r/the_paleblood_hunt_finalized_and_revised_with/.

[34] This is a somewhat common theory among the *Bloodborne* fan community. In a 2020 Reddit post, for instance, Mzuark points to Queen Annalise as one of the game's "content dead-ends." See Mzuark, "Look, I'm not saying it's unfinished but...", Reddit, September 20, 2020 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/iwb9ji/look_im_not_saying_its_unfinished_but/.

this beguiling figure – committed after the player reveals her location to him – might thus be seen as a displaced expression of the critical desire to "correct" artistic sins that often underlies our attempts to read them as hidden aesthetic virtues. This murder is one of the game's most shocking moments. Entering Annalise's throne room, the player finds the immortal queen literally torn to shreds, her flesh strewn about in tiny bits as a blood-drenched Alfred gloats to himself: "There, you filthy monstrosity! What good's your immortality now! ... All mangled and twisted, with every inside on the outside, for all the world to see!" Confronted with this grisly sight, most players will likely elect to put him down.

The irony, of course, is that Alfred hasn't even accomplished his goal. And indeed, the Vileblood Queen's *artistic* impurity – her evident unfinishedness as a functional element of *Bloodborne* – is only further implied by the fact that the player can resurrect her at enormous effort, yet with little reward. If one brings a still-writhing fragment of her body to the Altar of Despair beneath the Grand Cathedral – accessible only after defeating the ultra-difficult eldritch monstrosity Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos – we learn that time "flows in reverse for this scrap of flesh," thus rendering it eternal.[35] And sure enough, although Alfred, once killed, stays dead forever, Queen Annalise soon recomposes herself and reappears on the throne, enigmatic and impassive as always behind a featureless metal mask. Like any masterpiece, *Bloodborne* is similarly resilient. If close reading is often a process of disintegrating, deconstructing, and perhaps even "mangling" a text in order to see its insides, such analytic violence can only ever be a gesture of appreciation. In the chapters that follow, I reflect on possible artistic flaws only out of a deep conviction that the game can take it. For time flows in reverse for *Bloodborne*, too: even if we tear it to shreds, it will undoubtedly return to stare at us blankly.

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[35] Item description, Queenly Flesh.

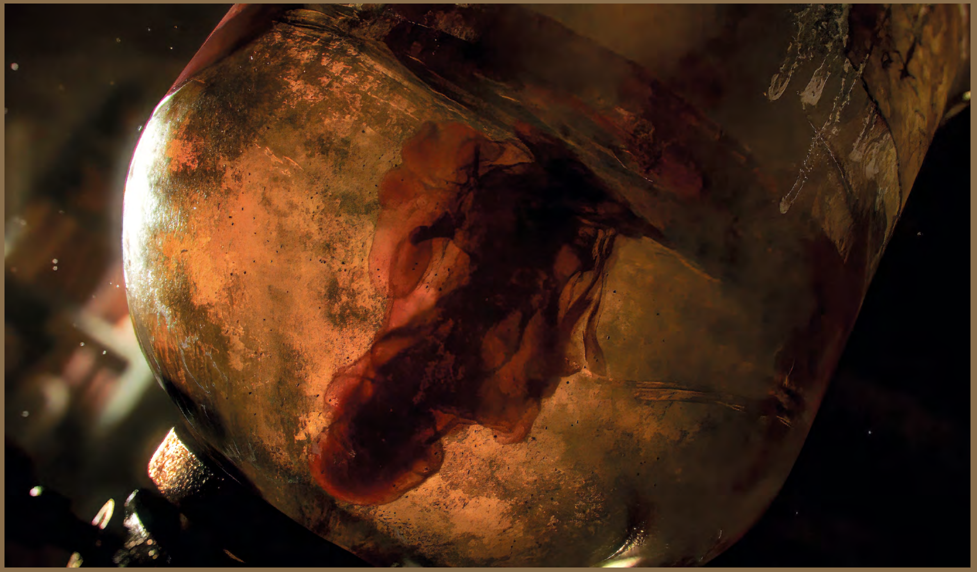
CHAPTER 1

On Strong Starts & Loose Ends

CHAPTER I

“Oh yes, paleblood”: *Bloodborne*’s first spoken line contains an enduring enigma. The ostensible reason for your character’s journey to the city of Yharnam, the ostensible object of your search throughout the long night of the Hunt, “paleblood” is also a narrative aporia: we will never learn definitively what it is.

Indeed, after four quick mentions in the opening minutes, paleblood drops almost entirely out of the story, with the word appearing only twice more over the game's roughly 40-hour duration, and in contexts that are opaque and self-contradictory. What at first seemed to be a substance – a special kind of blood – seems later to designate a *being*, as implied by a scribbled note found in the Lecture Hall: "The nameless moon presence beckoned by Laurence and his associates. Paleblood." Paleblood thus begins as a MacGuffin, vanishes utterly from the plot, and then resurfaces in this late moment drained of all objecthood. [1] It's as if the game sought to twist the narratologist Vladimir Propp's elemental structure of the folktale back on itself. [2] In *Bloodborne*'s opening scene, the Hero is advised by the Donor to find the Magical Agent: "Seek Paleblood to transcend the Hunt." [3] So far, so archetypal. Yet in a perverse exchange of Propp's narrative functions, suddenly the Magical Agent turns out to be not that item, ally, or power meant to aid the Hero in his conflict with the Villain, but rather the Villain itself



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[1] As Hoedt writes of this moment in *Narrative Design and Authorship in Bloodborne*, "You heard of Paleblood upon your arrival to Yharnam, yet what you thought was a substance, a form of blood, here seems to be referring to a creature of some kind, as if it were a name" (92). On Paleblood as a MacGuffin, see Alix Markman, "Bloodborne's Greatest Mystery: Paleblood Explained."

[2] In his *Morphology of the Folktale*––one of the most influential early works of formalist narrative theory––the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp argues that all Russian folktales can be reduced to 31 "functions" (narrative actions or events, e.g., "Departure," "Receipt of Magical Agent," "Rescue") involving 7 possible characters (Villain, Dispatcher, Helper, Princess, Donor, Hero, and False Hero). As Fredric Jameson writes in a gloss on Propp's theory: "The basic tale begins with either injury to a victim, or the lack of some important object. Thus, at the very beginning, the end result is given: it will consist in the retribution for the injury or the acquisition of the thing lacked" (*The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, 65). However, in its odd transfiguration of Paleblood – the "important object" the protagonist seems to "lack" – it is precisely this given end that *Bloodborne* rejects entirely.

[3] Note, Iosefka's Clinic.

(the Moon Presence is the game's final boss). This Villain, moreover, is itself the embodiment and architect of the game's own narrative deviance. A deviation in its own right – a magic substance that the plot "forgets" – paleblood ultimately denotes an eldritch god of repetition whose temporal distortions render *Bloodborne*'s plot nearly incoherent. All denizens of Yharnam, including the player, are caught in a cycle of the Moon Presence's making. It is the Moon Presence, we will finally learn, who has enlisted you in their Hunt to slay a rival god – a sequence that forms the narrative core of *Bloodborne*, and which, according to one character, has taken place multiple times over the ages – and it is the Moon Presence who, in one of the game's three possible endings, installs your character as the new custodian of the cycle, thus ensuring its perpetuation.[4] The Moon Presence's power over repetition even grants a rare diegetic justification to the gaming convention of New Game Plus, whereby the ending of *Bloodborne* sends your fully leveled character right back to the beginning to repeat the whole thing over, like a kind of Joycean ricorso where you get to keep your upgraded weapons.[5] What we might call *Bloodborne*'s "second" paleblood is thus Repetition itself; and even those players who manage to kill it are rewarded only by *becoming* it (in the game's secret, "true" ending) and then are sent back to the beginning all the same.

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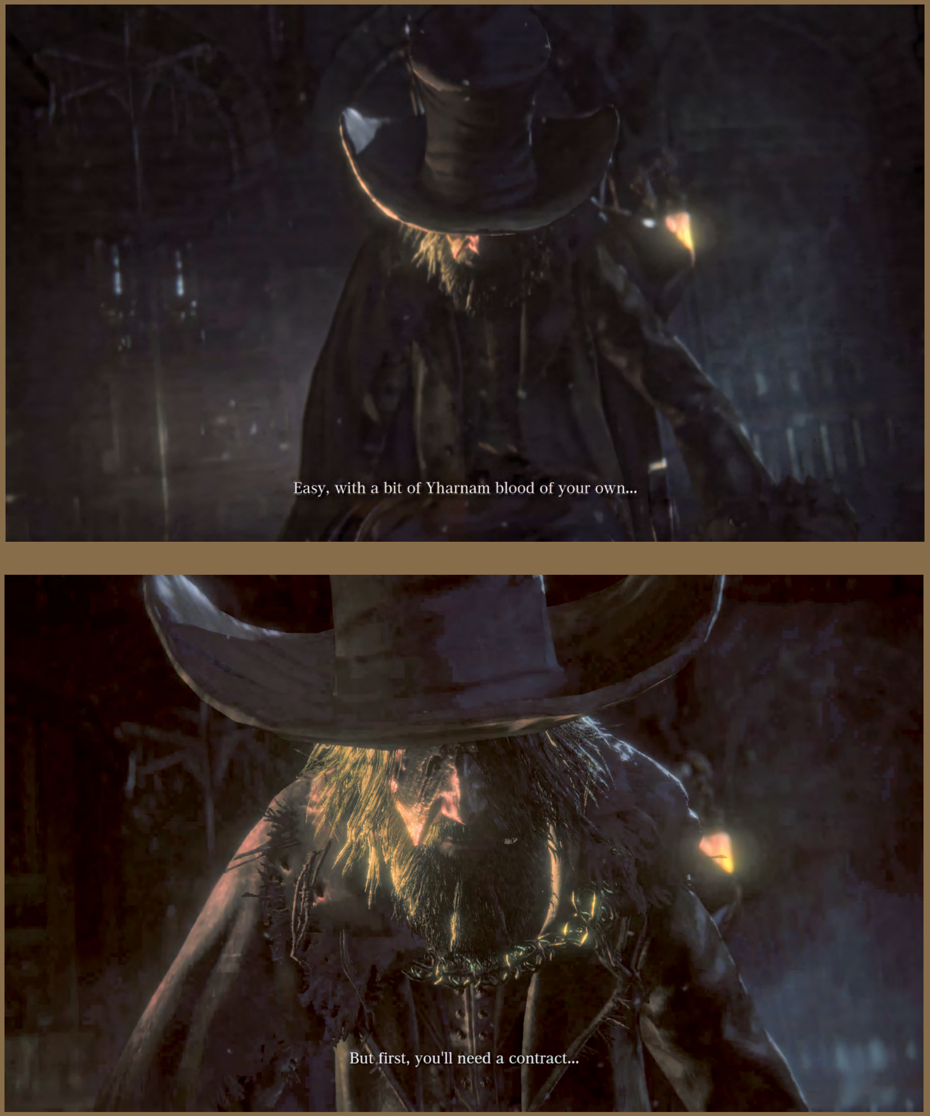
[4] The Doll informs us that "countless hunters" have visited the Hunter's Dream, and Redgrave argues that the Hunt itself has been repeated multiple times: "We already know that this is not the first hunt, and that the Hunter is not the first in the Hunter's dream ... the Blood Moon has risen in the past, and the Moon Presence has guided Hunters into completing its objectives through the use of Gehrman, its surrogate child" (*The Paleblood Hunt*, 97).

[5] As Hoedt writes in *Narrative Design and Authorship in Bloodborne*, "even the ending of the game offers no solace, drawing players into an endless loop of uncanny repetition. This is further embellished by the New Game Plus option, which allows players to jump right back into the game and relive their journey through *Bloodborne*'s Gothic horrors. The nightmare never ends, and Yharnam will always welcome you back" (254).

THE "SECOND" PALEBLOOD IS THUS REPETITION ITSELF AND THOSE WHO MANAGE TO KILL IT ARE SENT BACK TO THE BEGINNING


Easy, with a bit of Yharnam blood of your own...
But first, you'll need a contract...

Given his starring role in *Bloodborne*'s opening cinematic, one might expect the mysterious Blood Minister to figure prominently in the story. After this scene, however, he disappears completely from the game.

Strapped to a bed in the Blood Minister's operation room, the *Bloodborne* veteran therefore recognizes that there is some serious misdirection happening here. This misdirection equally involves the Blood Minister himself, who, mirroring the fate of paleblood the substance (as opposed to Paleblood the cosmic being), will disappear after this opening, never to be seen again. Both the Blood Minister's incipit ("Oh yes, paleblood ... Well, you've come to the right place ...") and the entire surrounding scene thus constitute a narrative promise that *Bloodborne* will almost immediately reject. Indeed, viewed in the light of what follows, *Bloodborne*'s introductory cutscene can seem less like a clever snare for the player – a way of putting them off the scent as to paleblood's true nature [6] – than a kind of alien object lodged in the narrative, an anomalous fragment from a different, more coherent story, where paleblood is just the magical substance that the Blood Minister suggests it is, and where your own character's reasons for asking about it (a question apparently posed just before the opening cutscene begins) might be explained in due time. Alas, your avatar will awaken from this operation with no memory of it – we don't even know how much time has passed – nor any memory, it seems, of all those characterological details that seem so relevant to the initial narrative situation: why you're on a bed receiving a blood transfusion, what foreign country you've traveled from, or why you're seeking paleblood. Your character's amnesia provides a plot-level justification for the game's retroactive suppression of this entire opening scenario.

This opening's anomalousness also extends to the level of visual style. One of the striking things about *Bloodborne*'s cutscenes is that they tend to lack cinematic self-consciousness. Like Hidetaka Miyazaki's other Souls games, *Bloodborne* avoids the slavish imitation of action-film cinematography that defines so many prestige titles, opting instead for a naïve frankness in its depiction of characters and locations, as if the “camera” existed simply to present them in all their unconcealed, static glory as graphical assets. One notices this especially in the way that most of the introductory boss cutscenes end: awkwardly, with the monstrosity lingering a little too long in the frame before the inevitable fadeout, a little too long after the “point” of the shot has already been made (“look at this menacing/disgusting foe!”), and usually with an accompanying sound effect – howling wind or alien death rattle – whose monotonous drone diffuses the tension of the monster’s “reveal” rather than sharpening it to a point. (I should add that I say all this mostly as a compliment. What some might call the “PS2 jankiness” of *Bloodborne*’s cutscenes might also be seen as a frank embrace of the medium’s fundamental visual awkwardness, if not a welcome rejection of its cinematic aspirations altogether.) But the opening cutscene works differently. As we gaze in first-person at the Blood Minister speaking invisibly to us from the shadows, one notices not just a cinematic manipulation of light and dark – highly unusual for *Bloodborne*, whose lighting effects are rudimentary for a modern blockbuster – but also an atypical degree of synchronization between camera, sound, and narrative disclosure. The Blood Minister wheels toward us into the dynamic lamplight, face still concealed by shadow, and then by his hat brim, until he lifts his head at the sonic climax of the shot – as an eerie background drone reaches a crescendo – to reveal that his eyes are covered in dirty rags.

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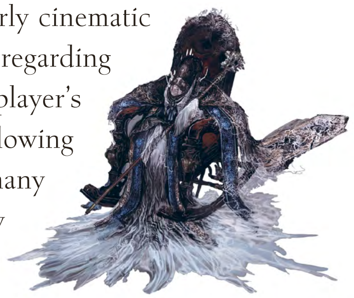
[6] I borrow the concept of a "snare" from Barthes's structuralist theory of narrative enigmas in *S/Z: An Essay*.

It’s a deft piece of worldbuilding. This properly cinematic slow roll serves not just as a nice visual surprise regarding our mysterious interlocutor, but also as the player’s initiation into a larger aspect of the fiction: following the eldritch teachings a certain Master Willem, many people in Yharnam either cover or surgically remove their eyes so as to cultivate “eyes on the inside.” Narratively, the revelation of the Blood Minister’s blindness thus functions concisely as both an answer (what will his face look like?) and an enigma (why do Yharnamites cover their eyes?). But it also resonates on a purely stylistic level. Here *Bloodborne* attains its greatest cinematic consciousness, its most artful dramatization of seeing, in the very act of revealing the paradoxical status of sight itself within its fictional world. For as we will learn, although Yharnamites renounce their sight, they move around exactly as if they could still see – even in the pitch of hand-to-hand combat – and it’s never explained whether this ability stems from some superhuman spatial awareness gained from the cursed blood they consume, or from the fact that they’ve managed to achieve Master Willem’s eldritch ideal. Given that your character controls in exactly the same way if you don a hat that covers your *own* eyes (even when your “Insight” stat, which measures your own attainment of cosmic second sight, is set at zero), one begins to suspect that physical eyesight in fact has no experiential significance in *Bloodborne*.



Like paleblood, then, the Blood Minister’s blindness ends up as something of an unresolved enigma. It will be elaborated in the hours to follow along certain narratively coherent lines – we do, after all, learn *why* Yharnamites renounce their sight – but the rules of the phenomenon also change ambiguously, such that it’s never clear whether the very quality of possessing or lacking sight, a quality announced with such flourish in this opening cutscene, is a meaningful distinction at all. Viewed retrospectively, *Bloodborne*’s opening makes a spectacle not of the Blood Minister’s blindness but rather of the meaninglessness of that blindness: this is why he stares directly into the camera, that is, into your eyes.

CHARA-
CTER
CREATOR

CHAPTER 2

On Waking Up

CHAPTER 2

A naturalized disjunction of video game narrative: to have complete control over the protagonist, to directly determine their actions, movements, and choices, to assume (literally rather than metaphorically) their point of view, to author the smallest details of their physical appearance, their clothing, even their memories – and yet, despite all of this, to know nothing of what they're thinking.

Like films and plays, in other words, video games have trouble with psychological interiority. And yet unlike those other art forms, video games seek constantly to elide the fundamental otherness of their protagonists, to convince the player that they are the hero of the story rather than merely their detached and powerless observer.[1] That such "agency" often boils down to the actor-like execution of rigid instructions for an absolutely fixed result is, in this respect, beside the point. The salient disjunction concerns not the actual degree of agency afforded to the player but rather the simple coexistence of such radical psychological opacity with any amount of control and interactivity whatsoever. Even the basic video game act of operating a person's limbs without knowing their mind is a metaphysical scandal; and any attempt to construe such bodily appropriation as a "power fantasy" (as many games obviously do) demands that we impose a second, narratively unauthorized fantasy of psychic *possession* – whereby we inhabit another's body while remaining, mentally, wholly ourselves – upon the far more disturbing reality of what is actually happening. For of course, in performing the impossible feats of athleticism and daring that are the video game protagonist's stock in trade, one is not at all *oneself* but rather a character within the imagined world who possesses, if only in theory, their own thoughts and desires. Strictly speaking, such role-playing is thus often as disabling as it is empowering: one enjoys the thrill of infinite physical prowess, yes, but only in a state of absolute psychological dislocation, like a dementia-addled god or a Homeric hero suffering from traumatic brain damage.

Granted, most games try their best to paper over this disjunction, whether through feeble attempts at genuine interiority (by having the protagonist talk to themselves in between story beats, for instance) or by radically simplifying the character's internal life and motivations until they're perfectly legible from without (this vengeful protagonist is very angry: time to unleash hell and feel good about it). *Bloodborne*, however, accentuates this disjunction rather than concealing it. To start, it needs to be emphasized once more just how strange it is that the opening cutscene begins *just after* your character has asked the all-important question about paleblood. No doubt, this choice seems at least partially motivated by the fact that your avatar, following the classic RPG convention of the "silent protagonist," is denied explicit speech. (Later conversations with NPCs will be carried out via an abstract text menu with no representation of what your character actually says.) Indeed, in *Bloodborne*'s opening cutscene such silence is structurally necessary, since at this point your character's gender and even tone of voice must remain unspecified: unlike many other games with a character-creation mechanic, it's only after the Blood Minister hands you his contract that you're taken to the character creator interface to set such details in stone. But the effect of this structural decision is profound. Right from the start, the game emphasizes the disorienting fact that your avatar – that is to say, "you" – knows more than you do, and indeed seems to possess the answer to the riddle that will haunt *Bloodborne* for its entirety. Being dropped into the character creator mere seconds later only exacerbates the feeling of dislocation. For not only is the player now prompted to linger over the fine details of their character's face – carefully adjusting sliders to control features like "Face Protrusion," "Nose/Forehead Ratio," "Brow Ridge Height," and "Eye Slant" until your avatar becomes as beautiful or hideous as you'd like – while still reeling from the game's most aggressive demonstration of that face's fundamental opacity, but *Bloodborne* adds another perverse twist by framing your starting class

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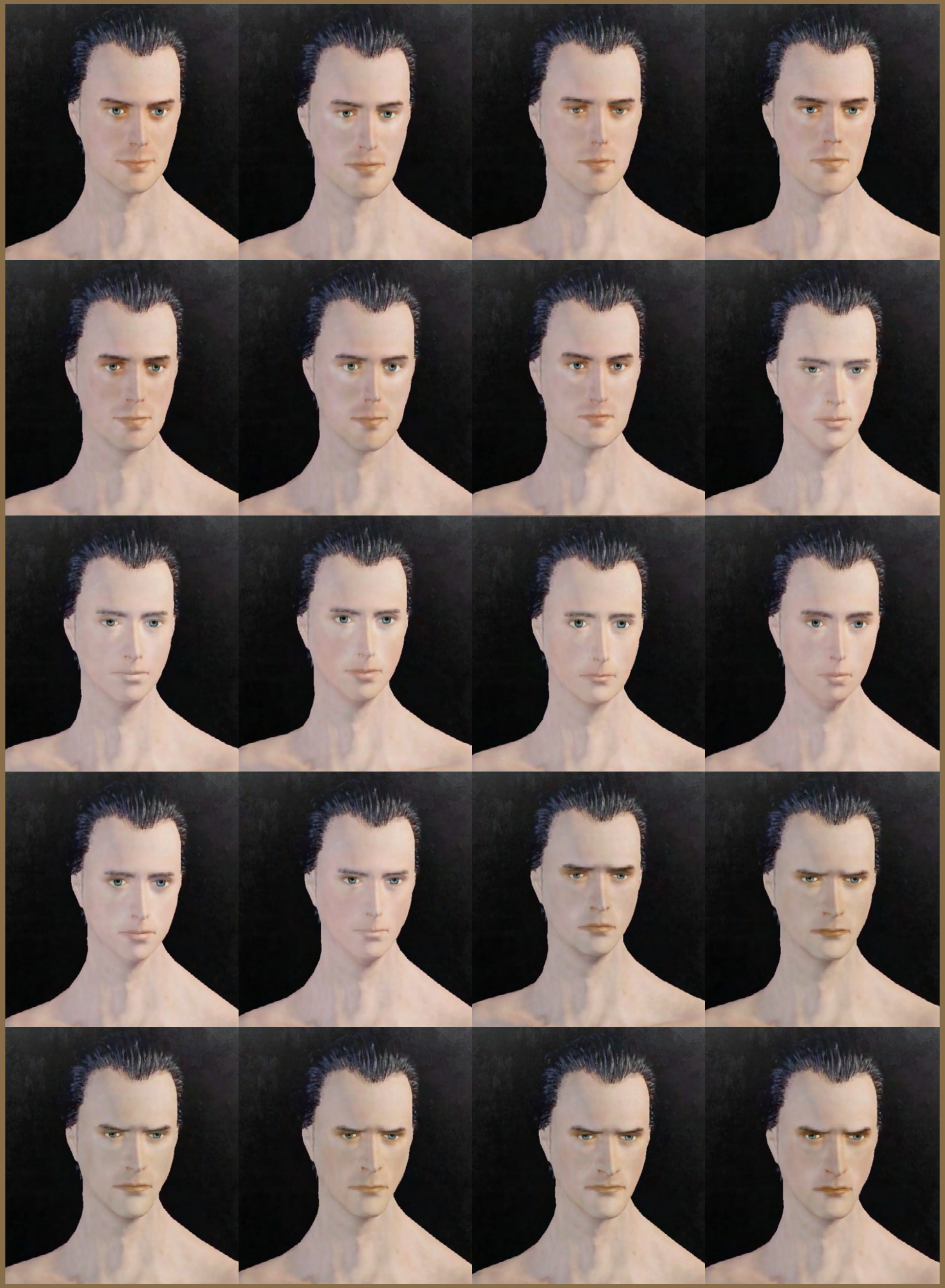
[1] Discussing the mimetic "weaknesses" of various artistic mediums, Tom Bissell notes that films "struggle with representing the inner world of their characters," and he speculates that video games, likewise, will probably never attain "the psychological acuity of fiction" (*Extra Lives*, 215-16).



Bloodborne's character creator allows you to fine-tune the smallest facial details, from "Brow Ridge Height" to "Nostril Size" to "Mouth-Chin Distance."

selection (an RPG convention whereby one chooses among various character archetypes possessing different combinations of strengths and weaknesses) precisely as a choice of *backstory*: you get to decide whether your character is the "lone survivor of a lost hamlet," a "military veteran experienced in war," a "noble scion to a respectable line with faith in your pedigree," and so on. The player is thus granted authority over the protagonist's deep history while being denied even the most rudimentary idea of their immediate past.

Yet the opening sequence's most jarring distortion of narrative perspective occurs moments later, when the player finally assumes control of their character. For upon waking up from the Blood Minister's operation, if one opens the inventory menu and reads the item descriptions attached to the clothes their avatar is currently wearing (such fragmentary descriptions being, of course, the primary vehicle through which *Bloodborne*, like the other Souls games, delivers its story), one will discover a strange narratorial quirk in the short text accompanying their drab Foreign Trousers:

> *Trousers worn upon awakening to the nightmare of blood and beasts.*
>
> *Not typical clothing for Yharnam, perhaps it is of foreign origin. It is said, after all, the traveler came to Yharnam from afar.*
>
> *Without memory, who will ever know?*

"It is said": this external, anonymous, collective voice constitutes an acute violation of narratorial consistency. For within a medium so deficient in psychological access, the normally functioning inventory menu at least permits an unusually effective mode of psychological *identification*. To deliberate over what weapons to equip, which pieces of protective gear to wear, and which helpful items to use in a given situation – all typical functions of such menu interfaces in RPG and action games – is to perform mental operations that, in theory, neatly overlap with the diegetic thoughts of your avatar. Indeed, in one respect *Bloodborne*, like the other Souls games, intensifies this form of psychic immersion precisely by making such deliberations *take time*. Whereas in most games opening a menu freezes the action – allowing you to "think" with the character within an extradiegetic, atemporal space of pure intellection – the menu interfaces in Souls games do not stop game time, thus further embedding these synchronized mental acts within the represented world, while also enabling your identification with an expanded range of psychological states: the panic of rifling through one's stock of supplies for a Molotov cocktail while a four-ton pig demon charges at you, for example, or the shock and confusion of suffering a surprise attack while you're perusing your collection of ornate keys. Considering this mental synchronization, it's thus all the more disorienting to find in the Foreign Trousers description sentences that seem not only to originate from outside your character's mind but also to assert a *collective* knowledge of your individual – and so far presumably private – experience. We are compelled to ask not just about the identity of this narrator who has insinuated themselves into your inventory menu, but also, on a more practical level, how Yharnam society even knows about you in the first place. Has the Blood Minister been talking? Did his blood transfusion – which seemed at first to last for only a few hours – actually leave you unconscious long enough for word to get around? Some of the first citizens you meet will in fact demonstrate general knowledge of your identity ("Are you that outsider?"), yet at no point do we receive any hint as to how this information was passed along.

Nevertheless, by looking closer at the Foreign Trousers description one can

perhaps venture a guess as to what's going on. Here the pertinent clue lies in the description's final line, which subtly inverts the psychological distortion caused by the third-person narration in the previous two sentences. For just as these latter sentences jarringly embed a collective, external perspective on your character within what seems otherwise to be your own private mental space, the final sentence uses the *form* of communal speculation to express a private thought: "Without memory, who will ever know?" In the game's English translation from the original Japanese, this sentence, though at first seeming to assume the external perspective of a bemused Yharnam society, in fact implies via its syntax that those wishing to know are precisely those "without memory" – a statement that of course makes sense for only one person: your character. The protagonist thus registers their own amnesia and loss of identity by ventriloquizing the Yharnam public: waking from the operation in a state of absolute self-difference, they narrate themselves as an other. If at first they were structurally barred from personal expression in their generic condition as silent protagonist, they now awaken to find themselves existentially barred as well, unable even to say "I." The psychic dislocation of the character creator thus proves "realistic" after the fact. Henceforth, the protagonist's experience of their own experiences will be that of an unknown, unknowing public – that is to say, us. In a video game, perhaps only such radical nonidentity permits true identification.

DOUBLE MOTIVATION

CHAPTER 3

On Narrative Confusion

CHAPTER 3

Like your character, *Bloodborne*'s narrative is sick. Indeed, your character's unnamed illness is a symptom of the game's larger narrative dysfunction: the story it tells is not just radically fragmented in its delivery (a FromSoftware signature since *Demon's Souls*), but genuinely incoherent.[1]

Consider once more the opening scene. *Bloodborne* begins with your avatar receiving a blood transfusion: why? Ostensibly because you're horribly ill. Yharnam blood, harvested from the eldritch Great Ones who watch over the city, is famed for its miraculous healing properties, and it seems your character has come to Yharnam seeking this cure. Cut dialogue from an earlier version of *Bloodborne* supports this reading: there the Blood Minister explicitly mentions a disease ravaging your homeland ("You suffer. Your loved ones suffer. It's like a curse ...") and states that "the blood used in ministration ... is ... [t]he only thing that can cure your sickness." [2]

Now, this motivation, were it fully ratified by the narrative, would lend a tidy causal logic to *Bloodborne*'s otherwise confused plot. In this hypothetical version of the story, your character comes to Yharnam seeking a cure, the Blood Minister offers this cure if you sign a contract pledging yourself to the Hunt, and you pursue the Hunt to its completion, thereby fulfilling your contract. But the final game takes a more convoluted route. Not only does it cover up almost all evidence of your illness while retaining the Blood Minister and his transfusion – as if it wanted to *conceal* your illness without actually eliminating it – but it also adds a second motivation from the outset: your character seeks

[1] This relation between sickness and narrative deviance resonates with an analogy that Kent Puckett draws in his *Narrative Theory: A Critical Introduction*. After quoting British philosopher Thomas Carlyle's aphorism, "the healthy know not of their health, but only the sick," Puckett suggests that the same may be true of narrative theory: "narrative becomes visible and thus calls out for a theory only when it has already begun to break down; narrative reveals itself as in need of a theory when narrative is 'sick'" (22-23). In Puckett's view, negative form thus constitutes not only narrative theory's privileged object but its very reason for being.

[2] Bloodborne Wiki (Fandom), "Blood Minister," last modified February 26, 2024 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://bloodborne.fandom.com/wiki/Blood_Minister. The Blood Minister's cut lines can be found in the "Unused Dialogue" section of this page.

Yharnamites afflicted by the beast plague are slaughtered *en masse* during the city's ritual Hunt.

“paleblood.” As a plot function, your sickness thus verges on redundancy. It seems to exist primarily to get your character to come to Yharnam, a city whose beast infestation, Cthulhu-worshipping government, and insane, violent populace make it an otherwise unappealing destination. Yet the search for paleblood already motivates this journey, so why does the story need an illness – one, moreover, that it immediately forgets – to bring you to the same place?

One answer might be that the illness doesn’t just get you to Yharnam. It also indirectly pledges you to the Hunt – the city’s ritual purge of beasts – thereby granting you access to the nightmare dimension of the Hunter’s Dream (the workshop suspended in a void that is the player’s main refuge and base of operations throughout the game), which in turn is ultimately revealed to be the private realm of the arch-villain Paleblood and the site of your final battle against it. Becoming a Hunter, then, is precisely what leads you to your true goal. In this reading, your sickness remains redundant as an initial motivation for traveling to Yharnam, but by obligating you to sign the Blood Minister’s contract in exchange for a dose of healing blood, it at least gets you where the story needs to go.

But does this contract really lead you to the Hunter’s Dream? Like most story questions, *Bloodborne* leaves this up to interpretation. Looking more closely at the game’s opening minutes, however, casts doubt on this possibility. In the first place, there’s nothing to suggest that the Blood Minister knows about the Hunter’s Dream or is otherwise connected to it in any way. Whereas the Dream lies in an alternate dimension open only to a select few, the Blood Minister is very much a representative of *Bloodborne*’s “real” world. He’s evidently a member of the Healing Church, the governing body that presides over the Hunt and controls the distribution of healing blood to the citizenry. (This is an impressive feat of vertical integration, for as we later learn, it’s precisely the healing blood that makes people transform into beasts, thus necessitating further Hunts.)[3] It follows, then, that the Hunt to which he contracts you is not the same Hunt you pursue as an agent of the Dream: *there are in fact two Hunts, just as there are two palebloods.* This is a crucial ambiguity. On the one hand, there is the local custom wherein Yharnam’s citizens roam the streets on certain nights to purge the city of beasts. You meet many of these citizens, some already transforming into beasts themselves, during your long night’s journey through Yharnam. To cleanse the streets and thus to cover up the Healing Church’s great deception: let’s call this Hunt A, a ritual that has occurred many times in Yharnam’s history and to which the Blood Minister contracts you upon your entrance into the city.[4]

But your character’s personal Hunt – let’s call it Hunt B – is different, even if it begins in the same place, bears the same name, and pursues the same goal of “halt[ing] the source of the spreading scourge of beasts.”[5] Whereas Hunt A is rooted in the physical world and concerns the history and fate of Yharnam, Hunt B transcends physical reality and the very laws of space and time. Hunt B is eternity. It has been happening forever; it repeats with each new game cycle and each time a player, anywhere, engages with *Bloodborne*. (The game’s fiction of perpetual repetition across alternate dimensions makes the existence of other players narratively canon.) And its quarry is not beasts but a god: the eldritch deity Mergo, who has been awakened in another dimension and whom Paleblood secretly enlists you to kill. Hunt B is thus the cosmic-horror counterpart to Hunt A's Gothic yarn: each represents its own genre. Famously, the intersection of these two genres constitutes Bloodborne's central twist, whereby a grounded Gothic adventure about an ailing Van Helsing-type morphs into a Lovecraftian fantasia spanning cosmic realms. Yet it's less often noted exactly how these two generic plots fit together. Their trajectory is not that of a single line leading from one to the other, even though many players point to a specific moment – the death of the spider-god Rom at the game's midpoint, which punctures the veil of reality and reveals Yharnam's eldritch truth – as the site of revelation and generic transformation. Actually, these two generic plots are overlaid from the start (how else to explain the otherworldly Hunter's Dream and your character's own immortality?), traveling in parallel lines that occasionally harmonize but just as often clash.

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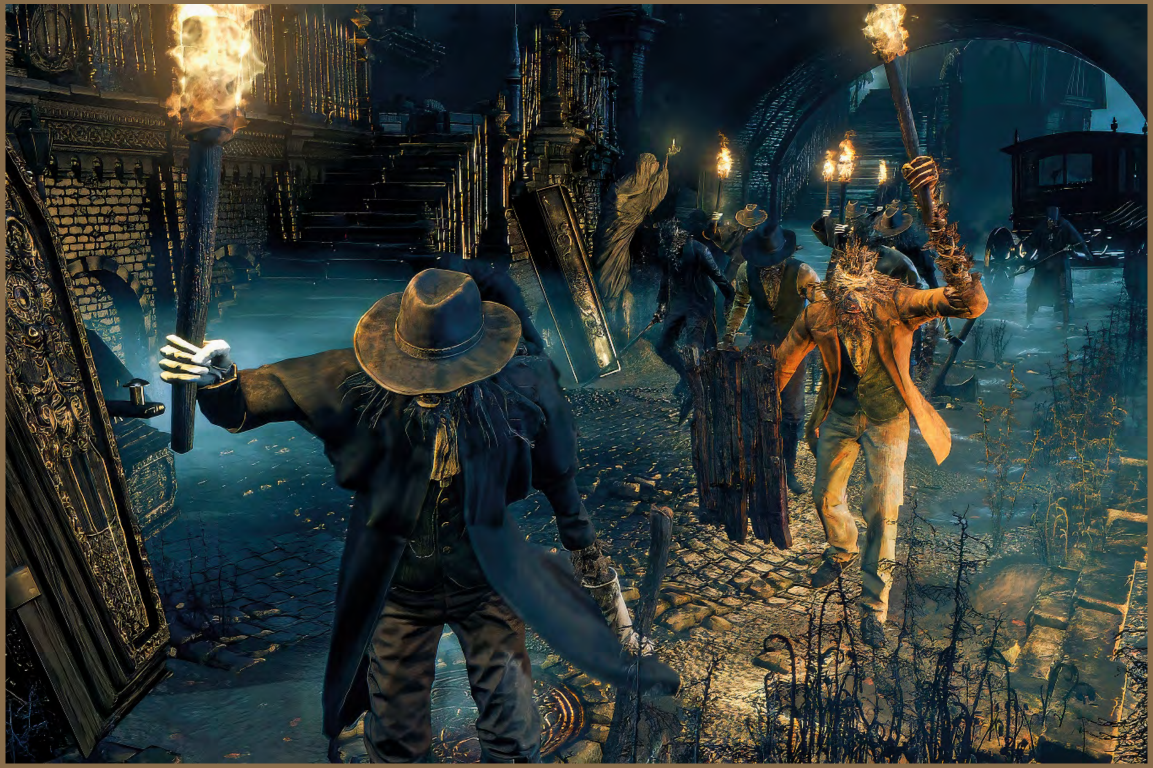
[3] Redgrave, *The Paleblood Hunt*, 35, 41-42. The present chapter leans heavily on Redgrave’s invaluable summary and analysis.

[4] Redgrave describes the traditional Hunt (what I’m calling Hunt A) thus: “They operated in the cover of darkness, disposing of Yharnamites who had succumbed to the Scourge of the Beast, likely as more of a cover-up than anything; anything to prevent the public becoming aware that the blood they were being administered was turning them into monsters” (18).

[5] Note, Hunter’s Dream.

For an example of this uneasy parallelism, consider once again the matter of the beast plague. As already noted, the game suggests that Yharnam's beast infestation arises periodically as a result of the tainted blood widely used by the populace to heal other illnesses and injuries. This explanation fits the logic of Hunt A: we can assume that successful Hunts in the past dealt with local eruptions of beasthood and involved none of the interdimensional traveling and deicide mandated by Hunt B. Yet from within the narrative logic of Hunt B, *only this Hunt can end the beast plague*, since according to those aware of interdimensional happenings, the current outbreak is really being caused by Mergo. The game thus gives two explanations for the beast plague that are hard to square. Granted, one could perhaps suppose that Mergo's agitated presence within its nightmare realm is merely awakening the latent beasthood in everyone's bloodstream, thus making Hunt B a simple intensification of Hunt A as it usually occurs. By this logic, one might speculate that whereas



Yharnam citizens form roving, violent mobs during Hunt A. Hunt B, by contrast, is a more private and secretive affair.

previous epidemics of beasthood arose “naturally” as the result of slow-acting infections caused by tainted blood, on this particular night the looming presence of Mergo is catalyzing a more rapid and aggressive outbreak. [6] But beyond requiring a significant interpretive leap, this explanation produces another case of double motivation that offends the laws of narrative economy: the beast plague is now caused by tainted blood and by Mergo. Although this explanation secures the narrative priority of Hunt B by making it assimilate Hunt A entirely, it has the *artistic* consequence of making the entire narrative edifice of Hunt B appear pointless, since the latter Hunt now arbitrarily supplies an additional motivation for what was already happening independently in the story (healing blood-induced beast transformation). It’s thus arguably more satisfying to view the two Hunts as fundamentally distinct, responding to beast outbreaks originating from wholly different causes, with the understanding that all the citizens participating in Hunt A tonight, including the Blood Minister, are simply deceived as to where the monsters are coming from. Yet this explanation also has the inverse effect of making the entire narrative edifice of *Hunt A* feel superfluous, since it all becomes one big misdirection. The game does a lot of work to set up Hunt A – you are contracted to this Hunt in the opening scene, you learn much about its history, champions, and procedures – and yet it turns out that none of this really bears on present-day events. The dual elaboration of Hunts A and B thus affords no easy reconciliation. Either they contradict each other, or they produce a kind of gratuitous narrative waste.

* * *

Bloodborne is afflicted everywhere by this doubleness. Its story is often described as ambiguous, but the concept of ambiguity doesn’t do justice to the kind of narrative perversity we’re tracking. Ambiguity in narrative usually obeys the structure of an *either/or*, whereby contradictory

interpretations for events are counterbalanced such that both seem equally valid while only one can be true. (This is the case, for example, in *Dark Souls*: either you’re the Chosen Undead and savior of Lordran or the mere dupe of the Gods.) [7] *Bloodborne*, by contrast, follows a structure of *both/and*. It doesn’t just suggest opposed alternatives but actually validates each side, granting both an equivalent reality. Duplication, whether of explanations and meanings or of actual characters and events, is the game’s basic structural law: everything in *Bloodborne* is either doubly motivated or literally doubled.

The doctor Iosefka, the first human character you meet after the Blood Minister, exemplifies this dynamic. She appears first as a doctor of the Healing Church, aiding you from behind a locked door within the clinic. Yet when you gain access to her wing of the building much later in the game, she attacks you, revealing herself to be an insane worshipper of the Great Ones. Standard narrative logic would imply that her earlier role is a deception and that her later appearance reveals her truth – just as standard narrative logic would imply that Hunt B is the real nature and purpose of Hunt A – an interpretation that in both cases assumes a model of linear development within a fundamental unity. But the truth is much stranger. As it turns out, there are actually *two Iosefkas*, a doctor of the Healing Church and a crazed initiate of the gods, who share the same name and appearance while being voiced by different actors: the narrative model here is one of pure

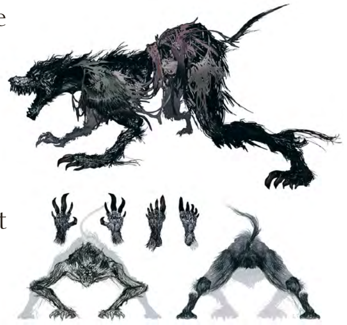
[6] Redgrave, for instance, makes a similar suggestion, though they argue that it is the Moon Presence rather than Mergo who is causing the transformation: “while the Beast lies within all of humanity, it is not unless they are tainted by the Old Blood that they become susceptible to corruption and the Beast takes over. It is when the Blood Moon draws closer that those who have been infected with the Scourge will succumb to their inner, terrible nature and become monsters” (94).

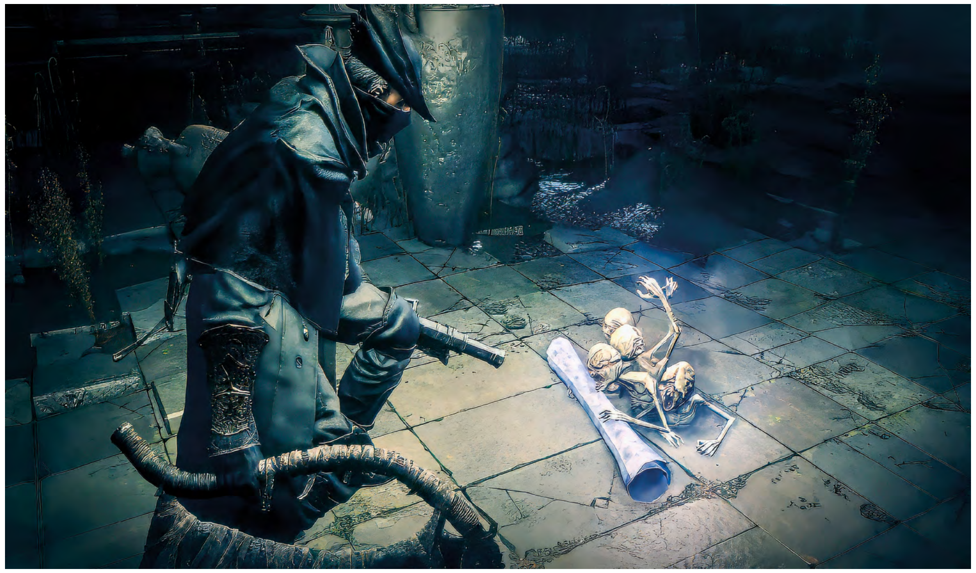
[7] In his YouTube video “Dark Souls Lore: Explained!,” VaatiVidya suggests that the mythology of the Chosen Undead is “most likely a deception by the Gods, probably designed to lure powerful heroes to Lordran” (0:37-0:47).

BLOODBORNE IS AFFLICTED EVERYWHERE BY DOUBLENESS. ITS STORY IS OFTEN DESCRIBED AS AMBIGUOUS

BUT THE CONCEPT OF AMBIGUITY DOESN'T DO JUSTICE TO THE KIND OF NARRATIVE PERVERSITY HERE duplication and substitution. Something similar also happens with the Blood Minister. An elderly, blind man in a wheelchair who initiates you into Hunt A, he is shortly replaced by another elderly, blind man in a wheelchair – Gehrman, custodian of the Hunter's Dream – who initiates you into Hunt B. The resemblance between these characters is so striking that players sometimes mistake them for the same person. But Gehrman is not the Blood Minister's true identity, even though this would be a more logical narrative choice, since it would justify the latter's permanent disappearance after the opening cutscene: he is simply another character with the same physical features and narrative function. The Blood Minister thus forms a crux in a complex network of doublings. Himself an echo of Gehrman, he also introduces a term that will later be doubled (Paleblood), a term that itself – even prior to its own doubling – produces your character's doubled motivation for traveling to Yharnam (seeking a cure/seeking Paleblood), while initiating a narrative arc, Hunt A, that almost immediately gains an uncanny reflection in Hunt B. His physical attributes, speech, plot function, and actions all manifest different forms of reduplication.

This chain of doublings, moreover, extends into the game's second cutscene – a structural echo of the opening scene that remains one of the most enigmatic sequences in all of *Bloodborne*. This scene begins immediately after you exit the character creator, mere minutes into the game and still prior to the commencement of actual gameplay. Your contract signed, the Blood Minister begins the transfusion and your character passes out. You then awaken sometime in the night to see a blood-soaked werewolf rise from the floor and approach your bed. Before it can attack you, however, something sets it aflame; and as the beast writhes on the ground, a host of pale, gremlin-like Messengers – benevolent emissaries of the Hunter's Dream – swarm your prostrate body while Gehrman's assistant, the animated Doll, speaks to them across dimensions: "Ah, you've found yourself a Hunter." You have thus been marked as a Hunter, not of the Healing Church, but of the Dream: this is *Bloodborne*'s second beginning, a moment of otherworldly intervention that binds you to the Hunter's Dream and initiates Hunt B.





The pale skin of the otherworldly Messengers makes them seem perhaps distantly related to the ancient Pthumerians from Yharnam's prehistory.

This scene is thus already a duplication on the plot level. Yet taken in isolation, it also contains another baffling case of dual motivation in the figure of the burning werewolf itself. For the game leaves it frustratingly unclear whether this werewolf is real or imaginary. On one hand, we might understand the creature as a symbolic vision, a hallucinated embodiment of the incipient beasthood now coursing through your veins due to the blood transfusion. The game supports this reading through certain anomalous features belonging to the werewolf: it's covered in blood, a unique visual effect that suggests its symbolic link to the healing blood, and it rises from the floor as if by magic, whereas other beasts you encounter in Yharnam obey physical laws. Yet true to form, the game immediately undercuts this suggestion by also asserting the creature's physical reality. For upon waking up, one of the first things you encounter is a flesh-and-blood werewolf lurking in the next room – one, moreover, whose depleted health bar implies that it's the same beast that was badly burned in the previous scene. This sequence thus produces an uncertainty akin to what the narrative theorist Tzvetan Todorov called the Fantastic mode in literature: a disturbing hesitation between supernatural and "realistic" explanations for the same phenomena.[8]

The stakes of this uncertainty, however, are quite different in this case, and not just because *Bloodborne* already admits supernatural explanations as a matter of course. (Here the salient difference is *between* classes of supernatural explanation: the Gothic versus the Cosmic.) More important than the shifting rules of the fictional world is what the werewolf's status says about the plot structure of *Bloodborne* itself. For in a dizzying metanarrative spiral, this emblem of doubleness, a werewolf both real and imaginary, folds back upon the very doubleness of the game's opening, upon the question of whether *Bloodborne*'s dual beginnings open one story or two. The werewolf's ontological uncertainty, that is, puts the narrative's structural unity itself at stake. For if the werewolf is a symbolic vision, then we may attribute its burning to your character, a leap that then allows us to connect this scene organically to the previous one. Let's assume, as some have suggested,[9] that this sequence is meant to be a symbolic representation of your character's immunity to the healing blood's worst side effect, and that this immunity is precisely what qualifies you as a Hunter of the Dream and beckons the Messengers to your side. This reading thus establishes a necessary connection between the Blood Minister's contract and your ascension to a Hunter of the Dream – *Bloodborne*'s first and second beginnings respectively – since your rare bodily response to the blood

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[8] See Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre.*

transfusion ends up summoning the Messengers to enlist you in Gehrman's cause.

At the same time, however, interpreting the werewolf as real (which, again, is a reading the game explicitly supports in at least one respect) permits no such causal link. For if the fire is not a symbolic representation of your supercharged antibodies, then where does it come from? Who actually saves you from the monster? A magic fire spell is found nowhere your character's arsenal (this isn't *Dark Souls*, after all), and even if it were, it would make little sense for you to possess this ability before being graced with the otherworldly powers of the Dream. Pyromancy is, however, one of the talents of the Pthumerians, the ancient race of pale-skinned humanoids whom the Messengers distantly resemble. And yet, if the Messengers are the ones who save you from the beast, then nothing connects this scene to the last other than the contingencies of time and place. For the Messengers must now be understood as acting on their own initiative rather than in response to your special show of immunity, which means they could just as easily have done this anywhere else, in response to any other kind of threat. Interpreting the werewolf as real reduces your ascension to an arbitrary intervention that just happens to take place in the Blood

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[9] The Reddit user BlackhawkRogueNinjaX, for instance, explains the cutscene thus: "You then slip into a dream state: what we see is a visual representation of the fact that 'beast hood' [sic] comes from the blood (so the werewolf literally coming out of a pool of blood). | It then progresses towards us representing us succumbing/turning to [sic] a beast ... But our will/desire is strong enough to resist ... And as a means of showing us resist the descent into beast hood the werewolf bursts into flames ... So we are special, we can naturally resist – the messengers see this and ... claim us as a moon scented hunter and link us to the dream ... Cue the start of the game!" BlackhawkRogueNinjaX, "I think I finally get the opening cinematic...", Reddit, October 14, 2015 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/3os2fo/i_think_i_finally_get_the_opening_cinematic/.

Minister's sickroom. The causal reconciliation of *Bloodborne*'s two beginnings thus hinges on another instance of dual elaboration that itself permits no reconciliation: the imaginary/real werewolf doubles the opening's doubleness.

* * *

Doublings all over the shop, as Father Gascoigne might say. Is there any way to systematize this perversity? We can now acknowledge that there is, at least, one way to explain it. Based on the game's cut content and promotional material, we might speculate that the story of *Bloodborne* was at one point actually centered on your character's illness and search for a cure, but that the developers later abandoned this plotline while leaving many of its component parts baked into the game (perhaps because mechanics, scenarios, and cutscenes had already been constructed around them: a common dilemma in game development). [10] Accepting this possibility helps account for several of the places where *Bloodborne* seems to be telling two disparate, and yet weirdly similar, stories at once. Chief among these is the mystery of paleblood. For it's perhaps conceivable (though entirely hypothetical) that paleblood was once precisely the cure that your character was supposed to be seeking. This would explain why the Blood Minister speaks of paleblood as a substance, rather than an entity, in the first cutscene (itself perhaps a relic from an earlier stage of development); why your terminally ill character asks for paleblood immediately upon meeting him; and why certain of the game's eldritch enemies conspicuously *bleed pale*. [11] In this scenario, moreover, there is no need for the plot contortions of Hunt B. Everything becomes more streamlined: the Blood Minister contracts you to help purge the city of beasts in exchange for some Yharnam blood to tide you over, and setting out to fulfill your contact naturally brings you to the hidden enclaves of the Healing Church, where the true elixir, and Yharnam's eldritch secret, await discovery. Here all the significant plot beats happen within the scope of the Hunt that you actually sign up for. We can hypothesize, however, that at some point this relatively coherent story was replaced with a quest to find and defeat an entity called Paleblood. For *Bloodborne*'s creators, then, the story of your character's sickness was itself a kind of narrative sickness that could only be healed with the *deus ex machina* (or more precisely the *deus ex luna*) of a villain bearing the very name of the cure. Yet like Yharnam's own healing blood, this elixir poisons *Bloodborne* against itself. The plot incoherence produced by overlaying a new meaning onto an existing structure (Paleblood/paleblood) is emblematic of the game's larger process of revision, which seems to have been primarily *additive*. The "true" plot of *Bloodborne* (what we have called Hunt B) is built atop and around the already-formed story beats, like the bizarre encrustations surrounding familiar monuments in the Hunter's Nightmare. The result is precisely the structure of dual elaboration and reduplication we've been tracking – a feature we may now understand as the effect of a fundamental indecision during *Bloodborne*'s development about the story's proper direction.

Nevertheless, even if we admit this prosaic explanation for the game's strange plotting, the effect is still aesthetically striking when viewed from a certain angle. For *Bloodborne*'s bifurcated plot structure ultimately resembles the very paradigm of narrative doubleness: allegory, a story that represents one thing while signifying another. Indeed, the two Hunts map quite neatly onto the two levels of meaning that allegory normally compresses into a single narrative line. Hunt A is the literal meaning: it begins with a worldly transaction, takes place over

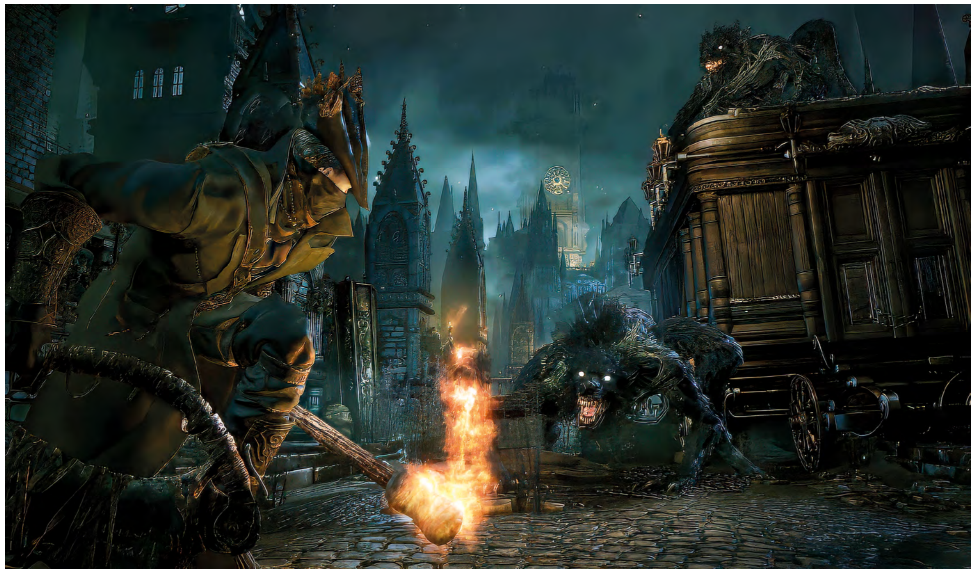
[10] Redgrave notes that *Bloodborne*'s promotional materials explicitly mention the protagonist's illness (*The Paleblood Hunt*, 16).

[11] Ibid., 29.

one night, and remains tied to physical reality. Hunt B, meanwhile, is the spiritual meaning: it begins with an otherworldly intervention, takes place beyond time, and transcends space and matter altogether. The key difference, however, is that unlike in true allegory these two narratives occur side by side: in *Bloodborne* both the literal and spiritual stories are equally literal. Although the awkward superimposition of these parallel stories produces narrative disjunctions that demand interpretation (like what we have done here), the same disjunctions are thus also effects of a kind of interpretation happening on the level of narrative itself, a constant rewriting of *Bloodborne*'s Gothic tale in a Cosmic mode. *Bloodborne* dramatizes the existence of the eldritch divine *in* the earthly – the crux of its own plot – by stacking these two self-contained stories atop one another and elaborating them both at once:

	Catalyst →	*Beginning* →	*Middle* →	*End*
Story 1 *Mode: Earthly* *Setting: Yharman* *Timeframe: One Night*	Sickness	Contract, Cure (cutscene 1)	Hunt A *Patron: Blood Minister* *Object: Beasts*	?
Story 2 *Mode: Cosmic* *Setting: Dream Realms* *Timeframe: Eternity*	Search for Paleblood	Ascension to Hunter (cutscene 1)	Hunt B *Patron: Gehrman* *Object: Mergo*	Death of Mergo

Yet this schema also reveals that the parallel structure is incomplete. Hunt A never gets a proper ending because at a certain point it's assimilated completely to Hunt B: the solution to the beast scourge can't be found in Yharnam, but only in the nightmare dimension where Mergo resides. *Bloodborne* thus fails to be two coherent stories just as it fails to be one. Ultimately, what we have called its narrative

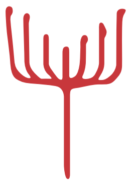


The player-character squares off against a werewolf. As far as I know, the werewolf you encounter in Iosefka's Clinic is the only one in the game who appears with a depleted health bar – a mechanical wrinkle that strongly implies it's the same creature from the opening cutscene.

sickness manifests not just in the double motivation produced by your own character's sickness in the opening scene (and all the further reduplications this presages) but also in the lack of a final doubling that would retroactively justify the first. The consolidation that "fixes" *Bloodborne*'s plot by winnowing it to a single line is therefore the moment that plot irrevocably goes astray – a fitting lapse for a story about a cure that's worse than the disease.

VEILING REFERENCE

CHAPTER 4

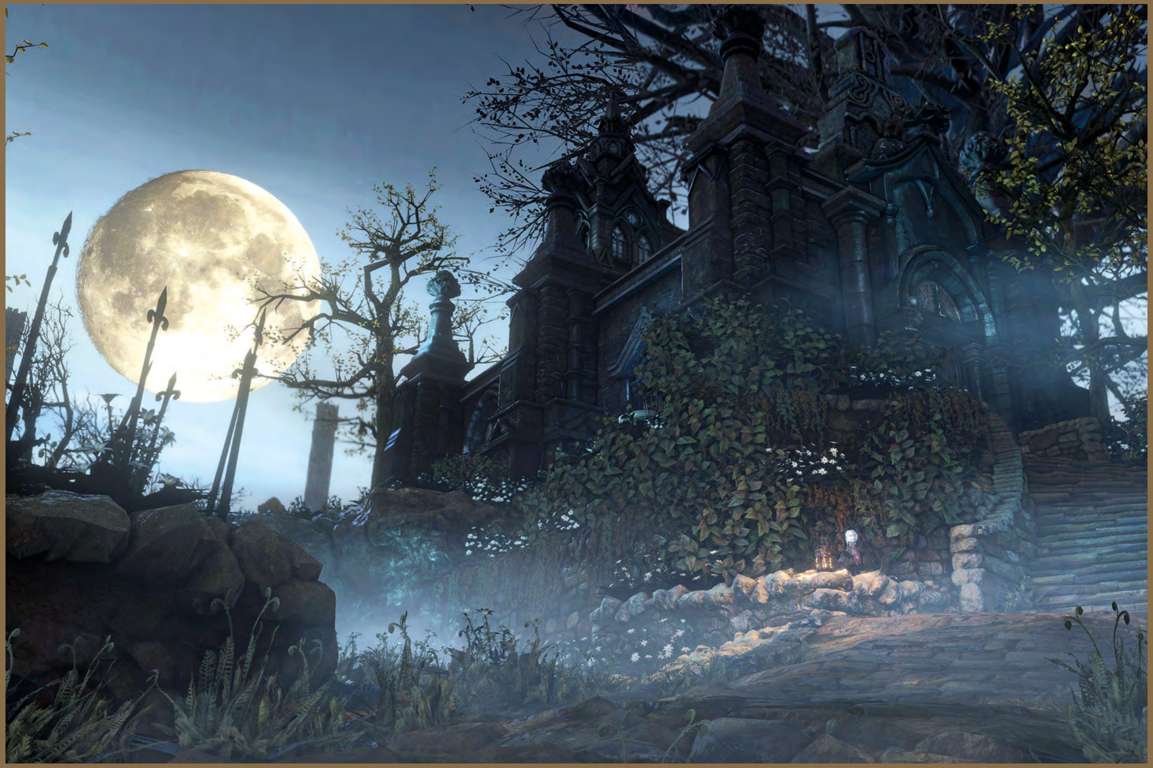


On the Hunter's Dream

CHAPTER 4

Bloodborne cites *Dark Souls* in many ways: consider the pillars in the Hunter's Dream. Stretching massively into the distance beyond your floating island, they repeat the striking visual effect of the titanic archtrees in Ash Lake, though perhaps with less harm to our suspension of disbelief. The archtrees, after all, partake too much of physical reality for their own good: spaced like so many columns, they seem literally to support the terrestrial world of *Dark Souls* while constituting its most pointed violation of spatial consistency.

For if each tree is supposed to be real, as solidly embedded in the earth's crust as the one we have just descended – in one of the greatest feats of 3D world design ever achieved – by following its trunk from the heart of Firelink Shrine to the shores of an underground sea, then why haven't we seen more of these trees in our journey above ground? Gazing across Lordran from the heights of Sen's Fortress reveals no other archtrees poking through the earth's crust, even though the topography of Ash Lake suggests that one should appear at least every few miles. And why, for that matter, does there seem to be sky above – dimly illuminated by some underground sun – rather than earth? We entered the nearest tree somewhere around its midpoint, where its trunk emerges from a poisonous swamp, and based on the distance of our descent through its hollow core, we should be, if not still embedded in soil and rock, at least able to see the massive geological structure supporting the body of water immediately above. But instead the trunk rises, like all the others, into a bank of luminous gray clouds. Proportions and spatial relations are thus completely out of joint. Indeed, although fans of the *Souls* games have often complained about the nonsensical transition from the top of a windmill to the caldera of a volcano in *Dark Souls II*, it's less often noted that Ash Lake performs the same spatial distortion, only inverted. We haven't descended nearly far enough for such a radical change of scenery, and moreover we seem to have violated a basic spatial law by boring deep underground only to find sky above. Have we in fact passed imperceptibly into another dimension? Or perhaps into a nexus (if not The Nexus) of multiple dimensions, whereby each archtree would represent a kind of Yggdrasill, a world-tree supporting its own Lordran, Drangleic, or Lothric? [1] This reading makes sense in relation to later Souls games, but it violates the fiction of *Dark Souls*, which involves no dimension-hopping and indeed seeks, in every other respect, to advertise its world's spatial continuity. An undoubted highlight of *Dark Souls* – a triumph of visual invention and sheer



The Hunter's Dream consists of a converted chapel and cemetery floating in an endless white void. It is, in other words, wholly out of place in the grounded Gothic world of *Bloodborne*'s opening hours.

atmosphere – Ash Lake is thus also a kind of failure, a moment of lapsed spatial coherence rather than a negation of it. [2]

The pillars in the Hunter's Dream, by contrast, raise no such questions. In part, this is clearly because in the nightmare realm of the Dream the rules of spatial consistency no longer apply. But for those familiar with *Dark Souls*, the mystery of these vast structures – whose presence is never explained in *Bloodborne*, or even referenced in any way – is also obscured beneath their allusive function. One looks at them and thinks: Ash Lake, not: what are these structures and why are they here? To be sure, this intertextuality also generates meaning. Only veterans of *Dark Souls*, for instance, will notice how the pillars repeat the distortion of physical reality that characterizes much of *Bloodborne's* eldritch phenomena: a kind of organicizing of stone. If statuary – itself ubiquitous in Yharnam – freezes organic forms at a human scale, this alien distortion makes stone itself organic, and at a scale that defies human labor. Witness the vast tumors that warp the streets of Yharnam in the Hunter's Nightmare, or the mounds of volcanic rock in the Nightmare of Mensis that are shaped like faces, or the mysterious human figures fused to the walls in the village of Yahar'Gul – their bodies arranged in unlikely vertical configurations that suggest less an actual event of petrification (whether magical spell or atomic blast) than a kind of melting of the walls themselves into agonized human forms. On the whole, though, the Dream pillars' evocation of the archtrees works like an alibi dissuading further prodding: in video games as in popular culture at large, easter eggs supply their own motivation.

And yet, for the first-time player of *Bloodborne*, accepting this explanation for the pillars' presence also defers the story revelation that would be gained by asking about what that presence implies – namely, that there are greater forces at work in Yharnam than what's initially apparent. In this respect, the pillars repeat on the visual level a story function that the Hunter's Dream also performs mechanically: the defusing of enigma through intertexuality. For what after all is the Hunter's Dream? A peaceful hub-world where you can upgrade your character and gear, purchase helpful items, and warp to various locations in Yharnam, it is obviously *Bloodborne's* version of The Nexus in *Demon's Souls*, Firelink Shrine in *Dark Souls*, and Majula in *Dark Souls II*. As such, it also serves as a hub for several of the interlocking gameplay systems that define the *Souls* genre as a whole. Most notably, it grounds the ludic structure of death and repetition, whereby dying in Yharnam revives your character at the nearest Dream lantern – portals to the Hunter's Dream – but also revives most of the enemies you've killed. The Dream, in other words, is precisely what motivates, both ludically and narratively, your character's immortality and the strange, asynchronous temporal rhythm that defines your progress through Yharnam.

But here a key distinction from its *Dark Souls* analogues proves crucial. For in *Dark Souls*, the narrative motivation for this repetitive structure is given from the beginning:

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[1] As a Reddit user with the unfortunate name SexyJapanties explains: “Ash lake is based on a concept in Norse mythology that the ‘world’ is actually a giant tree, and that Earth is a branch, or a series of branches on that tree ... The implication with Ash lake is that there are several of these world trees with the same base, all connected at Ash Lake.” SexyJapanties, comment on “What's the deal with Ash Lake?” by GoddamnMongorian, Reddit, May 5, 2014 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/24satc/whats_the_deal_with_ash_lake/.

[2] I take this distinction from Adorno, who writes apropos of “vagueness” in art: “The idea of many artworks that want to realize the experience of vagueness actually demands that the boundaries of their constitutive elements be effaced. But in such artworks the vague must be made distinct. Authentic works that defy the exigency of clarity all the same posit it implicitly in order to negate it; *essential to these works is not an absence of clarity but rather negated clarity.* Otherwise they would be simply amateurish” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 295; emphasis added).

the Undead Curse, caused by the waning of the First Flame (a kind of nuclear reactor powering the entire *Dark Souls* cosmos), has distorted time itself and trapped everyone in a cycle of perpetual rebirth. In *Bloodborne*, however, this explanation only arrives belatedly, with the late twist that introduces eldritch forces into the game's world. Your character is immortal and able to transcend time only because Paleblood, the true ruler of the Hunter's Dream, has willed it. *Bloodborne's* twist thus serves to justify retroactively the very existence of the Dream and the genre-defining gameplay systems it supports; and one would therefore get immediately to the truth of *Bloodborne* if, upon arriving at the Dream after dying for the first time, one were only to ask why such a fantastical location exists in an otherwise grounded Gothic world and why traveling there seems to have made your character unkillable. [3] But the Dream's formal symmetry with its predecessors forestalls such questions. One is prompted to treat this location and its corresponding gameplay systems as a mere mechanical echo devoid of narrative or mimetic content, a pure generic requirement rather than a pertinent clue. The veteran of *Dark Souls* looks at it and thinks: *Bloodborne* is a *Souls* game. Intertextuality thus hides *Bloodborne*'s secret.

The existence of magic in *Bloodborne* is actually a major spoiler, but we accept it readily even before its eldritch origins are revealed. Is this because we're primed to expect magic in a Souls game?

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[3] Redgrave makes a similar observation about the animated Doll in the Hunter's Dream: "It's funny really, when the player first starts playing Bloodborne they have no idea what rules the world works by. They don't know what is possible or impossible. Upon speaking with the Doll it simply becomes something accepted. 'Oh, so there's a talking Doll, of course there is.' They don't question it, nor do they consider how it came to be, it's just accepted as an occurrence of the world" (102).

WONDER

CHAPTER 5

On First Stepping Outside

CHAPTER 5

What should we call the feeling when, emerging at last from Iosefka's Clinic, you step out onto a terraced overlook and gaze upward, across a ruin-filled chasm, toward distant cathedral spires and the colossal arches of the Great Bridge glowing in the evening light? [1]

Steven Poole would likely call it wonder. “The jewel in the crown of what videogames offer,” he writes, “is the aesthetic emotion of wonder.” For Poole, this feeling stems from games’ ability to dynamically represent space, and more specifically, *architecture*: “[a game] is a way to experience architecture … If architecture is frozen music, then a videogame is liquid architecture.” [2] Yet if wonder, in Poole’s account, secures the artistic value of games as a medium, it would also seem to apply to only a small, if prominent, subset of them: essentially, 3D games that represent traversable space in a graphically impressive way. This last specification, moreover, implies a further limitation. The reliance of such games on cutting-edge rendering technology – which continues to advance at a rate far outpacing the technical development of every other representational medium in history – means that what is liable to seem impressive will often be historically bound to an extreme degree. In comparison to any modern big-budget release, Poole’s main example of architectural wonder evoked by games, the PS1 game *Tomb Raider* (1996), now appears quite primitive. The same thing is already happening to *Bloodborne*, and soon any appreciation of its dazzling achievements in visual design will need to be wrested with difficulty from our overall perception of its obtrusive graphical shortcomings. Video game wonder is historical; and to even conceive of it – which is of course different from the irrecoverable experience of actually feeling it – often requires a rigorous act of scholarly imagination, akin to envisioning the awe evoked by the Renaissance’s first achievements in perspective painting. [3]

Game wonder thus depends in every case on an awareness of technical constraint. This awareness may be sharpened by one’s

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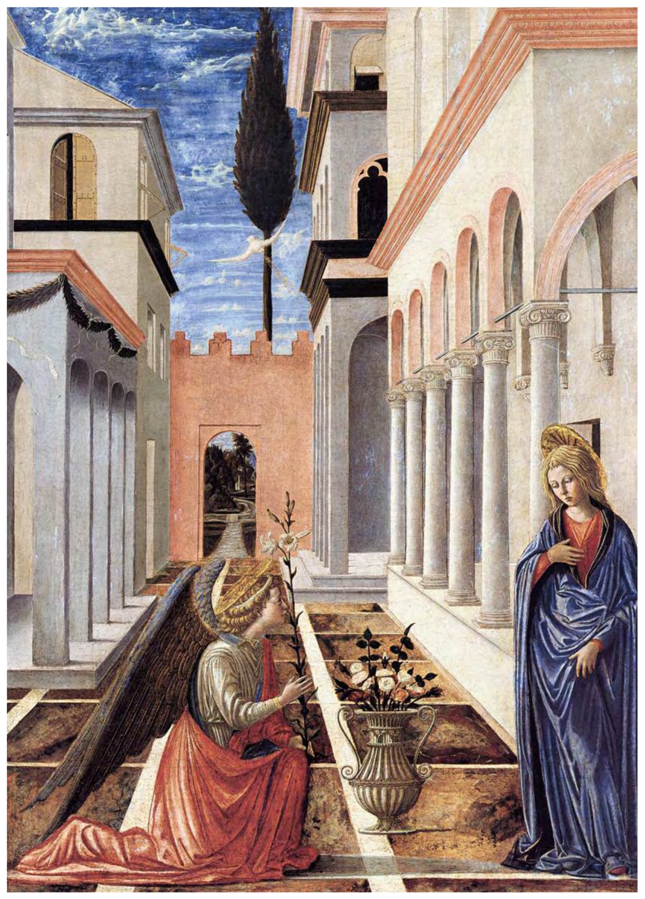
[1] An earlier version of this chapter originally appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* on February 11, 2023.

[2] Steven Poole, *Trigger Happy*, 231.

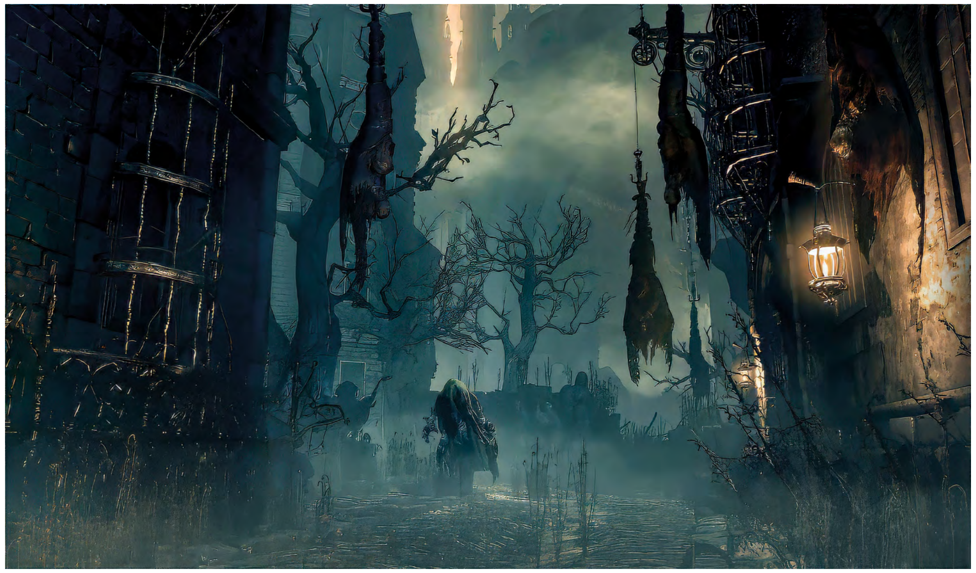
[3] Bissell writes that the “enabling of true, in-game, three-dimensional movement” in the early 1990s “was as climacteric a development for the medium as the discovery of perspective was for painting” (*Extra Lives*, 99).



Fra Carnevale’s *The Annunciation* (c. 1445/1450), one of the earliest examples of fixed perspective in Renaissance art. The development of this technique of pictorial rendering represents one of the few events comparable to the massive leaps in realistic representation that once occurred with each console generation.

familiarity with the actual computational processes that generate video game representations, but it's not required. For most players, simply playing a lot of games is enough to grant an intuitive idea of the medium's technical possibilities at a given moment. Game wonder thus resembles the formalist awe of the specialist even when it's experienced by an amateur. This is also why it's hard to communicate to someone who doesn't play games. Not only does the outsider, accustomed to the tightly controlled visual languages of painting and film, lack a basic understanding of the limitations imposed on visual style and mimetic fidelity by the medium's interactivity (which makes every object in a 3D gameworld a kind of sculpture that is obliged to both signify and represent in every direction, under minimal authorial constraints), but they also lack the more specialized comparative knowledge that would allow one to judge a given representation in its relation to other possible forms. The non-player judges games solely on their visual resemblance to the authorized forms of film and painting. Thus photorealism may elicit a reaction, as will the studied imitation of recognizable painterly or filmic styles, but even these resemblances merely reveal the games' ultimate inferiority to their visual models, since games (as Poole notes) are fundamentally antithetical to composition, that is, to visual form itself.

By contrast, the wonder felt by the specialist-amateur always derives from the understanding that any visual experience of virtual space is embedded within an interactive system that necessarily constrains the appearance and meaning of that space. This system may be nothing more than spatial interactivity as such – the ability to move around, to look at things from different direction, to exist *inside* the represented space – but it can also attain a complexity and artistry that make it evocative of wonder in its own right. Graphically, the cartoonishly miniaturized planets and moons visible in the sky in the sci-fi adventure game *Outer Wilds* (2019) look primitive when compared to the legitimately ravishing vistas of a game like *Uncharted 4* (2016). Yet the fact that the player can at any moment board their ship, fly seamlessly into space, land on any of these celestial bodies, and explore diverse biomes ruled by exaggerated ecological phenomena (sandstorms, cyclones, tectonic upheavals) that, miraculously, may *continue to run* within the game's clockwork system even as the planets wheel distantly overhead, makes *Outer Wild*'s toy cosmos just as generative of wonder as *Uncharted*'s essentially static backgrounds.



Bloodborne's massive gameworld frequently evokes feelings of wonder and terror – two emotions definitive of the classical sublime.

I must stress again the acute historical boundedness of this feeling – its dependence on the technological possibilities of the present – as well as the more or less zero-sum relation between sheer graphical splendor and systemic complexity that this technological dependency produces. Indeed, perhaps nothing is so wondrous as a game like *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015), which seems, in defiance of all imagined constraints, to offer visually stunning spaces that are fully integrated into complex gameplay systems. An epitome of game wonder: landing by chopper on a nighttime desert commando mission, one watches the gunship's lights recede over distant cliffs, only to radio for extraction and watch the same chopper *actually turn around* and begin a second approach. The force of this seemingly quotidian moment will likely be lost on anyone who doesn't play games, since it depends both on the knowledge that such distant objects in open-world video games are often "fake" – behaving essentially as cardboard cutouts with no interactive potential – and on a certain skepticism about object-permanence born from contemporary design norms. In many games, summoning an entity from afar simply causes it to materialize anew out of thin air, even if its former self exists somewhere else in the gameworld. [4] Yet the wonder evoked by *Metal Gear Solid V*'s helicopter is not simply an abstract appreciation of a rare systemic and hence existential consistency (a defining feature of all of Hideo Kojima's games), for what makes it wonder in the true sense is the additional element of space. Game wonder arises from a dialectical fusion of systems and spatiality: here, it stems precisely from the realization that such a vast space – distant sky and desert – is *completely and consistently* incorporated into the system, completely and consistently "alive," even when the player isn't looking.

Game wonder is thus at once technological and mimetic. Strictly speaking, it is an awe at the power of a technologically produced representation of spatial experience. Both of these qualities, however, may also cast doubt on the emotion's true artistic value. For on the one hand, this mimetic emphasis links game wonder to other forms of illusionism that normally make no claim to art, such as special effects in film, or the experiential recreation of those same set-piece scenes in a theme park. While Poole celebrates game wonder as an "aesthetic emotion" without qualification, this sheer pleasure in illusion also threatens to cast the wondering player as a credulous dupe of the culture industry.

At the same time, game wonder's technological basis raises further questions about its true object and meaning. So far I have stressed how this technological basis makes it an essentially "formalist" mode of appreciation, insofar as one marvels at an achievement of pure craft in the face of technical constraints. But this formalism also has a limit: for many players, the ultimate source of the spatial illusion is locked away in incomprehensible lines of code. Game wonder thus tends to involve an experience of inconceivability or imaginative failure on the player's part that links it to the aesthetic category of the sublime. [5] For Immanuel Kant, the sublime denoted an emotional state evoked by phenomena whose extraordinary power or size defeat our capacity for mental representation. (Mountains, hurricanes, oceans, stars, and Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome are all classic examples of the Kantian sublime.) Although games are often mere toys, their absurdly complex digital makeup may produce a similar breakdown of mental representation that hangs over the experience of game wonder like a shadow. One might therefore speak of game wonder as a variety of what Fredric Jameson calls the *technological sublime* – a uniquely modern experience of unthinkable complexity that, within Jameson's Marxist framework, always refers back to the inconceivably complex global market that produced the technological artifact. [6] Eugénie Shinkle elaborates

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[4] Your helicopter in *Metal Gear Solid V* still spawns and despawns, but it does so at a greater distance from the player than is usual in open-world games, and moreover will not spawn anew (as far as I can tell) while it's still visible within the gameworld.

[5] As Eugénie Shinkle writes in "Video Games and the Technological Sublime," "The full extent of the code that goes into the average commercial 3D game is itself a kind of mathematical sublime – an ensemble well beyond the grasp of any single individual."

[6] See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 37-38.

GAME WONDER, LIKE THE AWE EVOKED BY THE PYRAMIDS, OFTEN BEARS A CLOSE RELATION TO COLLECTIVE HUMAN SUFFERING

further on this connection, arguing that video games produce an effect akin to what Sianne Ngai calls *stuplimity* – a combination of sublime emotions and irritation, boredom, or banality that is characteristic of aesthetic experience in late capitalism.[7] From a Marxist angle, then, the true object of game wonder becomes the technology industry (if not the entirety of postmodern global capitalism) itself, and thereby implicates the player in the vast systems of domination and exploitation that fuel it. Indeed, the sheer amount of human labor now required to produce the medium's most dazzling feats of illusionism – often involving teams numbering in the hundreds forced to work extended hours for months or even years at a time – means that game wonder, like the awe evoked by the pyramids, often bears an especially close relation to collective human suffering.[8]

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Still, we can acknowledge these strikes against game wonder while observing that they do not sufficiently account for precisely the texture of its experience. It's important to note, for instance, that Shinkle's account of stuplimity deals not with game wonder in particular but rather with the larger experience of gameplay in general. Video games may indeed be stuplime as a medium – with their frequent combination of awe-inspiring sights and mind-numbing repetition, their extraordinary feats of technical complexity marshalled to the most inane ends – but the experience of game wonder actually has nothing tedious or banal about it. On the contrary, it is solemn and even, at times, ecstatic. Moreover, it tends to unfold at a tempo that troubles any easy equation with the hyperactive rush of ephemeral stimuli often used to characterize postmodern entertainment. Unlike a theme park or an action movie, game wonder is defined by a perceptual stasis. [9] It is an experience of arrest, of contemplative slowness, that the player deliberately enacts through the autonomous choice to halt the game's forward progress and simply *look*. Like the hiker in the Alps or the visitor at Saint Peter's, the wondering player stops and gapes. Game wonder is thus antithetical to actual gameplay, just as astonishment at a novelist's perfectly crafted sentence is antithetical to immersion in the story. This doesn't make it immune to critique – static absorption can always be recast as naïve complacency or infantile regression – but it does suggest an unusually close kinship, among other postmodern affects, to the classical aesthetic emotions as theorized by Kant. Indeed, one could say that game wonder resembles the classical sublime as much as its technological variety.

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[7] See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 248-97.

[8] Heather Alexandra's review of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) for *Kotaku* provides a clear expression of the conflicting feelings that can arise from this conjunction of awe and labor. While noting that *Odyssey* – which more or less recreates the entirety of Ancient Greece – presents a 3D world of "genuine beauty" that is "terrifying in its scope," Alexandra also worries over the "human cost" of such a monumental creation: "While I adored the majesty of *Odyssey's* world, I was often uncomfortable participating in it."

Here Poole's emphasis on architecture again becomes significant. For if game wonder is ultimately a pleasure in illusionism, then why does Poole give prominence to architecture over any other aspect of video game mimesis, such as effects of light and water, physics engines, or techniques for rendering faces? Perhaps because he means it as a shorthand for something broader: the digital formation of awe-inspiring spaces *in general*. In games, after all, a rendering of a canyon is just as much a feat of architecture as the rendering of a cathedral, since it's still a carefully wrought three-dimensional space (usually with its own "roof," or skybox – a distant background that forms a game environment's outer limits) designed to be traversed and inhabited by a human-sized figure. Although Poole's examples of wonder mostly involve buildings, their key feature seems to be the awesomeness of the virtual spaces such buildings embody, as for instance in *Ico* (2002), where he marvels at "beams of light penetrating cavernous, gloomy stone interiors" and the "distant battlements of the enormous castle appearing on the horizon in a bluish haze." [10] Game wonder thus seems often to depend on a certain scale that echoes traditional conceptions of sublimity. [11] To draw from our own examples, it may involve panoramic vistas of mountains and canyons (if not entire planets), storm-tossed oceans, or Gothic cityscapes – all canonical examples of the classical sublime.

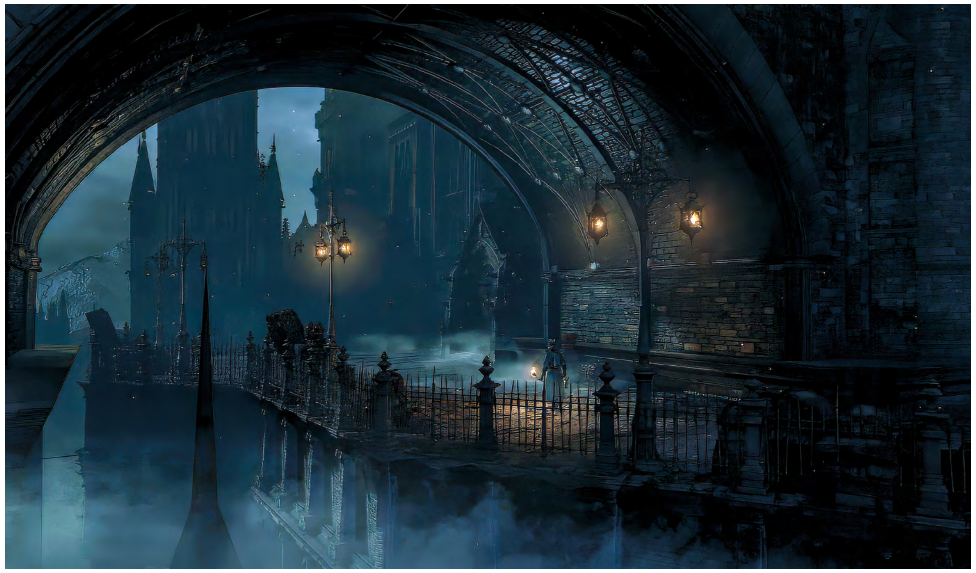
It's in this sense, finally, that *Bloodborne* is exemplary: not in the systemic complexity of its spaces, which is minimal, nor in its pure graphical accomplishment, which is impressive for its time but not extraordinary, but rather in its simple representation of classically sublime architecture. If game spaces, as Poole writes, are "cathedrals of fire," *Bloodborne* doubles down on this by presenting literal cathedrals whose Gothic style expresses an explicit will to awe. [12] As Ario Barzan

[9] Scott Bukatman, for instance, writes of special effects and certain rides: "Special effects sequences move (again, they exaggerate a fundamental property of the movies). Think of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) or even *Forbidden Planet*. The spectator is put in motion relative to the world onscreen. Recent developments in multimedia entertainment, including ridefilm systems, have supplemented this cinematic address with real bodily movement" (*Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, 121; emphasis original). On the slow tempo of game wonder, by contrast, see Poole, *Trigger Happy*, 232.

[10] Poole, *Trigger Happy*, 239. It's worth noting that Poole may focus on buildings largely because at the time of his writing in the early 2000s, 3D games were able to impressively render large geometric structures but still struggled to represent natural landscapes in a convincing way.

[11] In *Gaming and the Virtual Sublime: Rhetoric, Awe, Fear, and Death in Contemporary Video Games*, Matthew Spokes notes how "vast or magnificent spaces" (20) in video games can produce awe and wonder at several points. See especially his remarks on *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (27-28), *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (87-89), and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (89-92).

[12] Poole, *Trigger Happy*, 232.



In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke associates darkness and obscurity with the sublime. Fittingly, *Bloodborne* has some of the worst visibility of any 3D game that I know.

writes in "Understanding the Sublime Architecture of *Bloodborne*," Yharnam's architecture is "so eager to become something absolute and grand that it threatens to collapse into nonsense," leaving the player at once "enraptured by its obliterating massiveness and overfed on its excesses." Yet even this overt aspiration to sublimity doesn't entirely explain the player's amazement at their first view of Yharnam. For in *Bloodborne*, as in other open-world games, the experience of sublime scale hinges not only on giant structures, but also on an awareness of their relation to the even larger spatial totality that is the gameworld itself. Gazing upon the Great Bridge at the outset, one marvels at both its sheer size and its pure situatedness within a seamlessly traversable 3D map. Indeed, like FromSoftware's other Souls games, *Bloodborne* repeatedly makes a spectacle of its own spatial unity, dazzling the player with "distant views" (to cite one analysis of Souls world design)[13] of enormous landmarks that are fully integrated into the game's spatial system. "See that mountain in the distance? You can climb it." This statement has justly become an oft-mocked cliché of developer PR-speak, repeated ad nauseum in every new demonstration of another vapid and derivative open-world adventure. Yet like many cliches it contains an element of truth, and we shouldn't let the depressing state of many of the games it's used to advertise distract from the original wonder that it seeks to recapture. The cliché expresses a dream of twofold scale: not just a spatial system encompassing all that the eye can see, but one that includes *mountains.* As a simultaneous perception of the monumental and the totality that contains it, game wonder in such cases turns on a doubled spatial extension.

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A similar dream of twofold scale features in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Haunter of the Dark" (1936) – a story in which the protagonist Robert Blake becomes obsessed with a distant view. As we learn in the opening pages, Blake, a writer and painter who has recently moved to Providence, Rhode Island, gazes daily from his attic window at "the spectral hump" of Federal Hill two miles away, "bristling with huddled roofs and steeples whose remote outlines wavered mysteriously, taking fantastic forms as the smoke of the city swirled up and enmeshed them."[14] Like the player of *Bloodborne* wielding their Monocular from the heights of the Cathedral Ward, Blake stares in fascination at the "shimmering, spire-crowned mound in the distance whose unknown streets and labyrinthine gables so potently provoked his fancy," training his field-glasses "on that spectral,

H. P. LOVECRAFT

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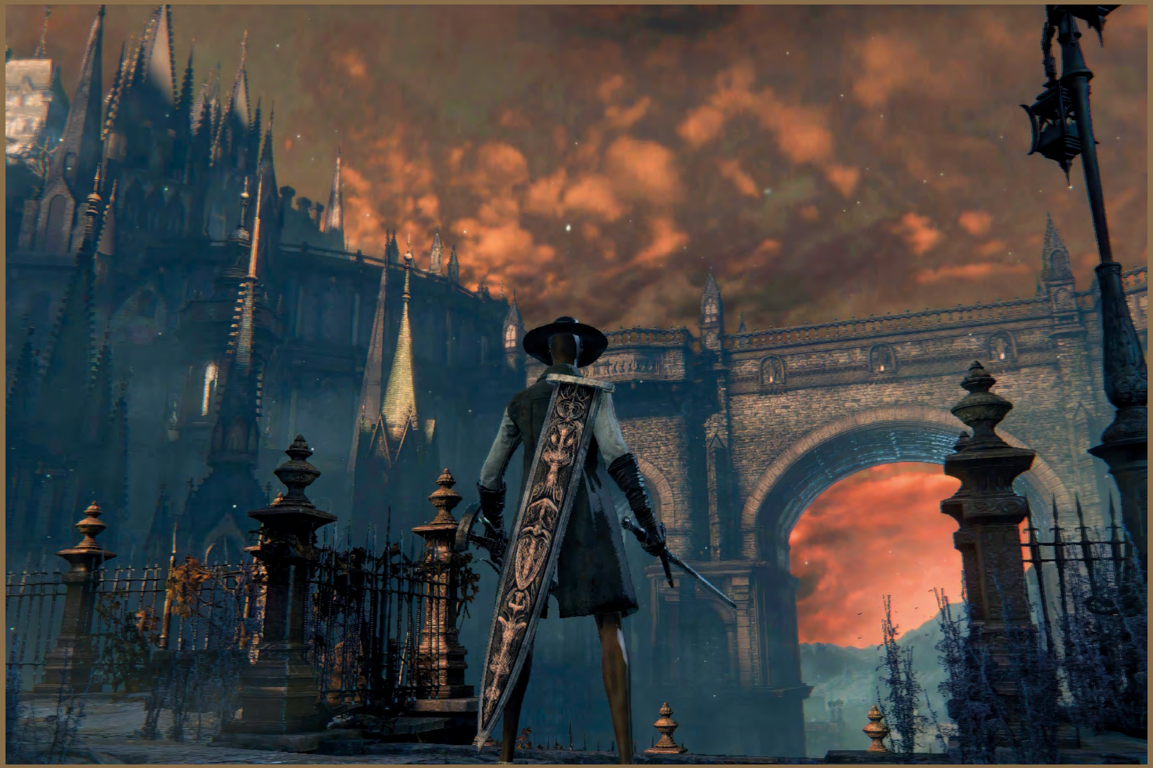
[13] See Illusorywall, "Dark Souls 1: Distant Views Explained (Part 1)," *Illusorywall* (blog), November 5, 2015 (accessed August 22, 2024), https://illusorywall.tumblr.com/post/132589360859/dark-souls-1-distant-views-explained-part-1.

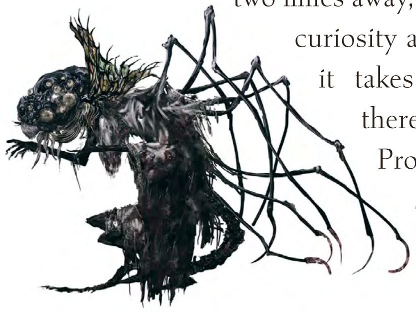
[14] Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, 338-40.



Bloodborne's looming Gothic revival architecture inspires genuine awe.

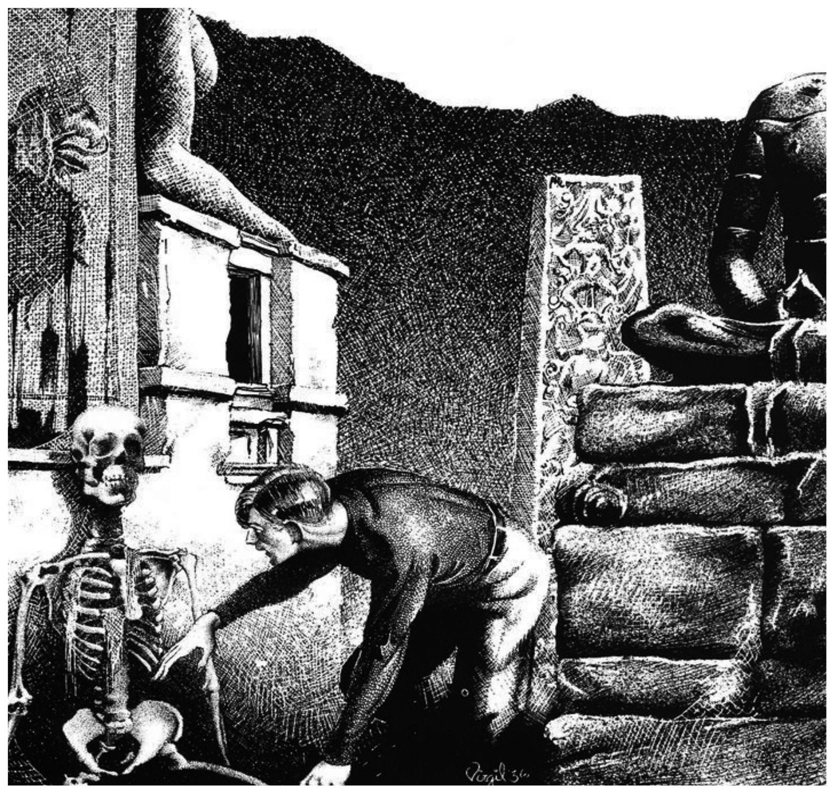
unreachable world beyond the curling smoke; picking out individual roofs and chimneys and steeples, and speculating upon the bizarre and curious mysteries they might house." Most of all, Blake is transfixed by a monumental structure straight out of *Bloodborne*, a "huge, dark church" styled in the "experimental form of Gothic revival": "It stood out with especial distinctness at certain hours of the day, and at sunset the great tower and tapering steeple loomed blackly against the flaming sky."

Blake's fascination with this church strikingly anticipates some of the complexities of game wonder. In the first place, it emerges specifically out of an awareness of arbitrary, and indeed rather gamelike, limitations. Like many a player, Blake at first wonders whether this awe-inspiring vista is merely an "ethereal world" that might "vanish in a dream if he ever tried to seek it out and enter it in person." Such, in fact, is often literally the case in games, where backdrops that look stunning from a distance regularly devolve up close into a mess of low-resolution textures and jagged phantom surfaces. (The player's awe at the mountain you can actually climb depends on precisely this limitation, which was a near-universal expectation in games until technological advances made genuinely open 3D worlds attainable in the early 2000s.) Yet even when Blake confirms the distant neighborhood's reality – he learns from his acquaintances that it's a "vast Italian quarter" – he continues to think of it as an "unreachable world." This phrase, which the narrator uses twice in the opening pages, is puzzling. We're told that Federal Hill is only two miles away, so what prevents Blake from satiating his curiosity and actually visiting the place? Strangely, it takes months for the thought of walking there even to cross his mind: he moves to Providence in the winter, but it's not until spring that he first thinks "of crossing the city and climbing bodily up that fabulous slope into the smoke-wreathed



world of dream." The story gives no explicit reason for this delay. Is Blake's fascination with Federal Hill mixed with an unconscious dread that blocks the thought of actually going there? Does part of him already recognize that exploring the spire will be his doom? This explanation seems plausible, but the story gives no direct evidence for it, and it's just as reasonable to assume that Lovecraft has simply suppressed the possibility of Blake making the trip until the plot needs him to do so. In game design parlance, we might say the hill and spire have been "gated": made inaccessible until certain (narrative) requirements have been met.

As with game wonder, such limitations form the precondition for Blake's amazement that Federal Hill is nevertheless real and – eventually – traversable. Yet Blake's obsession also resembles game wonder in its ambiguous relation to the classical sublime. For the story implies that the view itself possesses a similar blend of sublimity and derivativeness: Blake's fascination with this Gothic Revival church is mediated simultaneously through the spectacle of modern industry and the received tropes of fiction. In a curious passage, we're told that the hill "seemed somehow alien, half fabulous, and linked to the unreal, intangible marvels of Blake's own tales and pictures," and that this feeling "would persist long after the hill had faded into the violet, lamp-starred twilight, and the court-house floodlights and the red Industrial Trust beacon had blazed up to make the night grotesque." This passage establishes important distinctions that immediately threaten to collapse. It states that the view from Blake's study is *similar* to material from his own stories and paintings, and that this similarity is evident *even when* the view is marred by what, in theory, absolutely opposes it: the oppressive signs of commercial, industrial modernity. However, those signs also uncannily mirror the Gothic spectacle they blot out, a fact that dissolves the passage's key opposition and aligns all three subjects – the distant hill, the spectacle of industrial commerce, and Blake's art – along a spectrum of basic resemblance. Although the narrator



An illustration featured in the original magazine publication of "The Haunter of the Dark" in 1936. In Lovecraft's story, the protagonist becomes obsessed with a monumental structure observable from his attic window.

LOVECRAFT'S DESCRIPTION ANTICIPATES THE AESTHETIC AMBIGUITIES EVOKED BY GAMES LIKE *BLOODBORNE* THAT REPLICATE SUBLIME SPECTACLE

denigrates the floodlit modern view by calling it "grotesque," the same word (whose negative charge already seems somewhat compromised in a horror story) is later used to describe the dark spirit who inhabits the church tower itself: a witness reports seeing "a grotesque and hideous mass of smoke in the air" on the night that it escapes.[15] Likewise, the blazing red beacon of the Industrial Trust strangely replicates the pyromantic spectacle of the church spire "loom[ing] ... against the flaming sky." The sublime view thus isn't antithetical to the debased, commercial view, but instead stands as its mirror image. Furthermore, this sublime/commercial spectacle seems to derive part of its appeal from its resemblance to "Blake's own tales and pictures." It's as if Blake, like the 18th-century enthusiasts of the Gothic who toured artificial ruins, were here transfixed by a copy of his own preexisting artistic ideal. No wonder this view shares traits with the adjacent commercial spectacle: it is itself a mere instance of his brand, and in his curiosity at the mysterious contents of those "individual roofs and chimneys and steeples" we might sense a hint of purely professional interest.

Could there be a more apt figure for the ambiguity of game wonder? Poised between genuine sublimity and debased commercialism, between the singular aesthetic experience and a shallow simulacrum of one, between wonder at a marvelous thing and wonder at a copy of that thing, Lovecraft's description of Blake's distant view anticipates the aesthetic ambiguities evoked by games, like *Bloodborne*, that replicate precisely this kind of sublime spectacle. Poole calls video game spaces "cathedrals of fire" because they are awesome feats of architecture made out of "immaterial light." Yet the same reverent phrase could also describe a Las Vegas casino. If *Bloodborne* literalizes Poole's extravagant figure, "The Haunter of the Dark" anticipates how game wonder combines both kinds of light – flaming sky and commercial beacon – into an uncertain blend.

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[15] Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, 358.

FUN/FORM

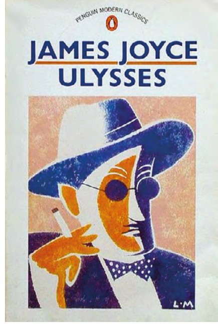
CHAPTER 6

On Close-Reading Video Games

CHAPTER 6

As narrative works, video games tend to be impoverished on the level of content but extraordinarily sophisticated on the level of form. In this they resemble much of modernist literature. Beneath its restless stylistic experimentation, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a rather sentimental (even clichéd) story about a struggling marriage; and similarly, literary critics have sometimes marveled at how hackneyed modernist ideas about life and art turn out to be when stripped of their complex, disruptive delivery systems. [1]

JAMES JOYCE



But those delivery systems are the point: what *Ulysses* really gives us is less a modern retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* than an odyssey of *style itself*, an adventure of pure language that traverses every conceivable form, structure, device, and style of novelistic writing.[2] By perpetually reinventing literary form (or "making it new," as the modernist poet Ezra Pound would say), modernist works like *Ulysses* self-consciously demand that we pay attention to form, that we at once suffer and derive pleasure from it, far more than most of us are used to.[3]

Video games intensify this disproportion between formal and thematic interest. Here the most dazzling feats of technical design, stylistic invention, and formal surprise often serve to transmit stories of startling vapidness and stupidity. With few exceptions, even the best video game stories are simplistic when compared to novels or films treating similar themes. In most cases, the best a game can aspire to be is elevated pulp; and those that nobly attempt to go further usually fail spectacularly, whether from inept writing (*Nier: Automata*, *Death Stranding*) or by ceasing to be interesting as a game (*Gone Home*, *What Remains of Edith Finch*).

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[1] Jameson, for instance, notes that the modernists "borrow[ed] all kinds of windy notions of genius and inspiration from the Romantic era" (*A Singular Modernity*, 199).

[2] See Karen Lawrence's classic book *The Odyssey of Style in Ulysses.*

[3] Some might argue that all works of literature do this, but those people have been deceived by the modernists themselves, who cannily derived their theoretical and technical principles from non-modernist works – the Metaphysical poets of the English Renaissance, Ancient Greek fragments, Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Keats and Wordsworth – and thus naturalized modernist aesthetics as the secret law of all art in a way that continues to confuse our perception of the period.

For all its brilliant and thoughtful design, *Bloodborne* has a simple heart: this is fundamentally a game about killing things.

Yet in exchange for this failing (which, according to some, may be an inescapable part of the medium), games offer an extraordinary diversity of forms. As Patrick Jagoda has written, there is "something experimental" – that is to say formally inventive – "about all games." And although Jagoda adds that this statement extends well beyond those games that scholars "find most ... formally novel," the qualification is unnecessary.[4] Compared to novels or films, all games are indeed formally unique. Certainly, there are some that explicitly try to be difficult through their form – to genuinely discomfit and disorient the player and to upend their assumptions about what a game can or should look like – in a way that more closely replicates modernism's negative relation to the conventions of a given medium. Jagoda is likely thinking of such games when he writes that games "can be understood as experimental in ways that accord with ... earlier experimental art forms ... such as the modernist novel or avant-garde cinema."[5] But even the most derivative

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[4] Jagoda, *Experimental Games*, 74

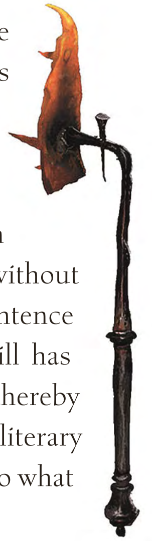
[5] Ibid., 36

blockbuster action game has elements of formal novelty. A game's form – in the sense of its rules, mechanics, and possibilities for play – is simply what defines it as a work, and constitutes arguably the first thing we notice when attending to it. Whereas only the most overtly experimental novels and films inspire us to ask, "What is the correct way to interact with this work? What rules and interpretive strategies will allow me to make sense of it? How do the different parts fit together?", most games force us to ask some version of these questions. All games, simply by virtue of being games, are obliged to make it new.

Moreover, even when parts of a game are formally derivative or formulaic, they still obtrude precisely *as formal elements*. Video games, in other words, make formalism our default mode of perception. In this respect, they converge with literary modernism in a second, more general way: simply by inspiring a critical attention to form. For although all works of literature have form – a sensible, designed structure of language – it was largely modernist works, produced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that prompted literary critics to begin studying it seriously. Perhaps the most famous of these critics was Viktor Shklovsky, a Russian scholar who held that one function of great artworks is to "lay bare the device" –– that is, to foreground the priority of form in literary composition over and above the surface elements of plot and theme. [6] Whereas common sense might imagine works of literature to be defined by their content

VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY

[6] Jameson notes that "both the American and the Russian critical movements [of formalist analysis] are contemporaneous with a great modernistic literature" and that "both arise in part as an attempt to do theoretical justice to that literature" (*Prison-House*, 45). He also observes that for Shklovsky, the technique of "laying bare the device" has the end result of transforming "the specific and unique structure of literary modernism" into "the basic structure of literature in general" (*Prison-House*, 89). 'Deathloop.'"



(by particular characters, the settings they inhabit, and the actions they perform), Shklovsky argued that literary works are in fact composed primarily of mechanical “devices” like rhyme, repetition, and point-of-view narration – purely formal structures that bear no relation to reality. (“In art,” Shklovksy wrote, “blood is not bloody … it just rhymes with ‘flood.’”) [7] “Laying bare” such devices thus means using them without any story motivation whatsoever – say, ending a novel mid-sentence just because you can, rather than because the narrator’s quill has run dry or the protagonist has just been assassinated – thereby highlighting the autonomous forms that actually determine literary composition and jolting the reader into a newfound attention to what is truly artistic about art.

This is a radical position because it denies the intuitive experience of immersion in an artwork’s represented world. For Shklovsky, story events that are of monumental consequence to the characters, such as a shipwreck or an abduction by pirates, possess in truth a purely technical motivation (in this case, to prolong the story), and thus have no more relation to the real world than a game of chess has to “the reality of India.” [8] But Shklovsky’s analogy to chess here is telling. Although they often have representational content (chess is nominally a mimesis of war), games, unlike novels, usually require no special attention to show that their internal logic relates only distantly, if at all, to the things in the world that they otherwise imitate. Like machines – another of Shklovsky’s famous metaphors for artistic form – games are designed to function self-sufficiently and wear this fact on their sleeve. Even when they have genuine narrative ambitions, it’s usually abundantly clear when elements of the story or represented world are merely narrative pretexts for aspects of game form that would otherwise operate wholly independently. It may have been revolutionary for Shklovsky to suggest that a shipwreck is just a trick for extending a story, but any novice gamer could tell you that Kratos loses his powers at the beginning of every *God of War* game because otherwise there’d be no skill trees to grind through. Likewise, the ancient ruins of the *Uncharted* series are full of waist-high debris solely because combat in these games revolves around crouching behind cover. Video games train us constantly in the formalist lesson that representation and narrative may obey rules other than those of “realism,” and may indeed be motivated by something entirely separate from the desire to reproduce, in art, aspects of human experience. To be a formalist critic is thus not only to imitate a mechanic (as Shklovsky suggests) but also to analyze a literary text as if it were a game. [9]

* * *

And yet, for the formalist critic of games themselves, this overlap leads to an interpretive bind. For not only has formalism’s founding gesture of subordinating content to form – a major source of its surprise and intellectual pleasure – already been preempted by the obtrusive autonomy of ludic form within most narrative games, but the game critic, searching about for other interpretive options, is also denied many basic ways of making form *meaningful*. For Shklovsky himself, it should be said, form's meaning was less of a problem. Although he had his own elaborate theory of what makes artistic form valuable (centered on the notion of how art "estranges" the world by disrupting our habitual perceptions of it), his theory was perhaps most influential simply in getting critics to begin analyzing literary form seriously; and indeed, it remains something of an open question how Shklovsky's formalist framework connects to his broader theories of artistic value.[10] For subsequent critics of narrative form, however, the end goal of formalist analysis has frequently been to heighten our appreciation of exactly the dimension of narrative that Shklovsky puts in question: namely, representation. To state it in the baldest terms, formalism, especially as practiced by academics today, very often boils down to showing how form expresses – however subtly, complexly, or counterintuitively – a content. The seemingly autonomous elements of language and story structure (in literature), or cinematography and editing (in film), that is, are perpetually routed back – via the circuitous path of the critic's subtle analysis – into something that the story is "about."

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[7] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 159. I also discuss the relation between Shklovsky’s theory of art and video game form in my essay “Repetition, with a Difference: On ‘Deathloop.’”

[8] Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 35-36. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Marie-Laure Ryan notes how game “texts” reverse the normal hierarchy of form and content: “The text as world upholds the classical ideal of an organic unity of form and content. The form is dictated by the content and should not attract attention to itself. It supports the text like an internal skeleton. | The text as game treats form as an exoskeleton: rather than subordinating form to content, it treats content as the filler of the form. As we have seen, games are constituted by arbitrary rules, and literary texts imitate games by subjecting themselves to pragmatically unnecessary formal constraints” (194).

[9] Ngai notes that artistic “gimmicks” similarly reverse Shklovsky’s perceptual model, calling attention to a work’s technique almost by default and thus casting doubt on the usefulness of “laying bare the device” for renewing or estranging our experience of art. See *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form*, 83.

This critical alchemy takes many shapes, and is perhaps best illustrated by example. Imagine, then, that you're reading a postwar spy novel, and on a certain page you discover a local curiosity of narrative form – say, a momentary ambiguity in point of view that makes it hard to know from whose perspective you're viewing a scene. For the formalist critic of today, this feature presents a wealth of interpretive

Bloodborne is an exceptional work of art in no small part because it has some of the most exquisitely designed and best-feeling combat in any 3D action game. But what is critical analysis supposed to do with this fact?

options, all of which imbue form itself with mimetic power. On the simplest level, you might argue that this ambiguity implicitly reflects an experience happening within the fiction, for instance, the experience of the protagonist, whose spy training allows him to view any event or conversation from another's eyes. Or, moving to a broader conceptual scale, you might argue that this ambiguity subtly echoes a central theme or idea of the work, for instance, the way in which paranoia involves a confusion of perspectives. Or, if you're of a more psychoanalytic bent, you might argue that this unexplained, seemingly unmotivated moment of confusion actually manifests something the protagonist has repressed, such as a traumatic experience. Or if you're a Marxist critic, you might argue that it echoes a broader historical tension in the society from which the novel was born, for instance, a newly emergent difficulty in reconciling a synoptic view of the world system with the contingent, limited situation of one's individual life.

Each of these formalist arguments involves a different degree of fidelity to the story's explicit contents (the Marxist and psychoanalytic

[10] Jameson notes a "profound ambiguity" in Shklovsky's work by which "it is never clear... whether it is the content or the form itself which is defamiliarized" (*Prison-House*, 75). I would state the paradox thus: Shklovsky believes that art estranges the world by disrupting our habitual perception of it. But then formalist perception disrupts our habitual perception of art by showing how it actually doesn't relate to the world.

perspectives, by rule, run counter to what's literally being depicted on the page), but all of them lean equally on a version of representation. In each of them, a formal structure gives us a picture of something: it tells a story and/or reinforces the story already being told. And this ultimately makes sense. For at the end of the day, fictional narratives are representational works. Whatever the creator's intentions, each word or shot, each microscopic technical or stylistic decision, necessarily enters into a relationship with the presentation of a world, simply because this is what narratives do. For all their technical subtlety, the kind of formalist analyses just mentioned merely take this fact and run with it. They honor the sovereign representational intention of narrative form by finding new angles and patterns by which to make even its smallest details expressive of human experience.

But game form obeys a different sovereign intention. Granted, video games also represent worlds and tell stories within them, and thus contain unique representational structures whose internal relations and details could be analyzed, and made expressive, in a similar way. But we have seen that this narrative intention frequently chafes against a second intention, a second formal logic, which is precisely to be a game. To be a *compelling* game – that is to say, a fun game. This is the central paradox for the critic interested in game form: so much of a game's formal complexity, novelty, and sophistication – so much of its exquisite craft and structural daring – explicitly serves the interest of an experience that seems to defy all conceptualization, all "reading": fun. As Johan Huizinga famously observes, the concept of fun "resists all analysis, all logical interpretation."[11] Some critics, like Ian Bogost, even hold fun to be an empty concept for this very reason. Bogost writes that "fun," as an adjective, is a "placeholder more than a description," and that as "an aesthetic assessment ... 'This is a fun game' is akin to saying, 'That was a good book.' It's a generic, empty signifier that does little more than telegraph the speaker's unexamined, basic satisfaction."[12] Yet such critiques, which are oddly common among serious game theorists, surely go too far. The fact that fun resists analysis doesn't make it a vacuous term. Rather, fun is difficult to interpret because *pleasure* is difficult to interpret, whether we're speaking of fun gameplay, or (in what seems perhaps closely related) one's pleasure in music, or even food. The problem isn't that "fun" lacks meaning, but rather that fun itself lacks meaning.[13] One may of course analyze the role of fun in a given culture, or ask about what kind of structures are likely to produce it, but in itself the experience of fun is interpretively barren. And yet academic formalism has trained us that aesthetic form is rich with meaning at every possible scale. Serious game critics' rejection of fun as a concept is thus different from, say, that of an Adorno who held fun to be a mode of complacent gratification by which the masses are held hostage by the culture industry. Rather, we might speculate that such critics find fun theoretically suspect because it aggressively counters precisely what they wish to do: to interpret game form. For all its restless formal novelty and self-consciousness, game form alienates the formalist critic. It barely expresses anything (or if it does, it does so only distantly, via metaphor). And although it constantly converges with representational structures (environments, characters, actions, plot), in itself it says nothing about the world, despite occasional critical attempts to make it "speak." Fun form renders

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[11] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, 3. Quoted in Ian Bogost, *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games*, 76.

[12] Bogost, *Play Anything*, 62-63.

[13] Poole makes a similar suggestion when he writes that gameplay action "does not have an overarching 'meaning' in the way that a novel or a film does; it is untranslatable, like music" (*Trigger Happy*, 183).

criticism tautological. It can be analyzed at length in a technical-artistic sense, and at extreme levels of formalistic precision no less, but such analysis can only tend toward the affirmation that the work's formal choices lead, indeed, to fun. [14] We might therefore conclude that fun inspires only a Formalism in the genuine Shlovskian sense, that is, a detailed technical analysis that is exhausted in the act of showing how the components of the work, whatever their outward motivations, ultimately serve no other interest than the production of exactly the work that it is. [15]

All of which is to say that *Bloodborne* is ridiculously fun – that this constitutes perhaps its greatest "artistic" achievement, and yet, as a formalist myself, I'm not sure what to say about this fact. Certainly, I could dwell on how the game's core structure of death and repetition lends a thrilling tension to exploring Yharnam's treacherous streets and dark corners, and gives every one of the player's actions a significance lacking from other action-adventure games. (Bogost, otherwise so suspicious of fun, is surely right that genuine fun has nothing to do with "enjoyment without effort," but rather depends on some measure of difficulty and risk: "Fun is not only the delight in success, but also the panic of uncertainty, the agony of failure.") [16] Likewise, I could note how this risk goes hand in hand with a gratifying feeling of continual progress, as the game's recursive structure of exploration furnishes you with constant stream of power-granting "blood echoes" that feel all the more precious

BLOODBORNE
MAKES
"GRINDING"
FUN BY
BY USING
PERPETUAL
DANGER TO
KEEP IT FROM
DEVOLVING
INTO MINDLESS
REPETITION

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[14] Fun's tautological nature makes it akin to beauty in Roland Barthes's formulation: "Beauty (unlike ugliness) cannot really be explained: in each part of the body it stands out, repeats itself, but it does not describe itself. Like a god (and as empty), it can only say: *I am what I am*" (S/Z, 33; italics original).

[15] "For the [Russian] Formalists," Jameson writes, "everything in the work exists in order to permit the work to come into being in the first place" (*Prison-House*, 82).

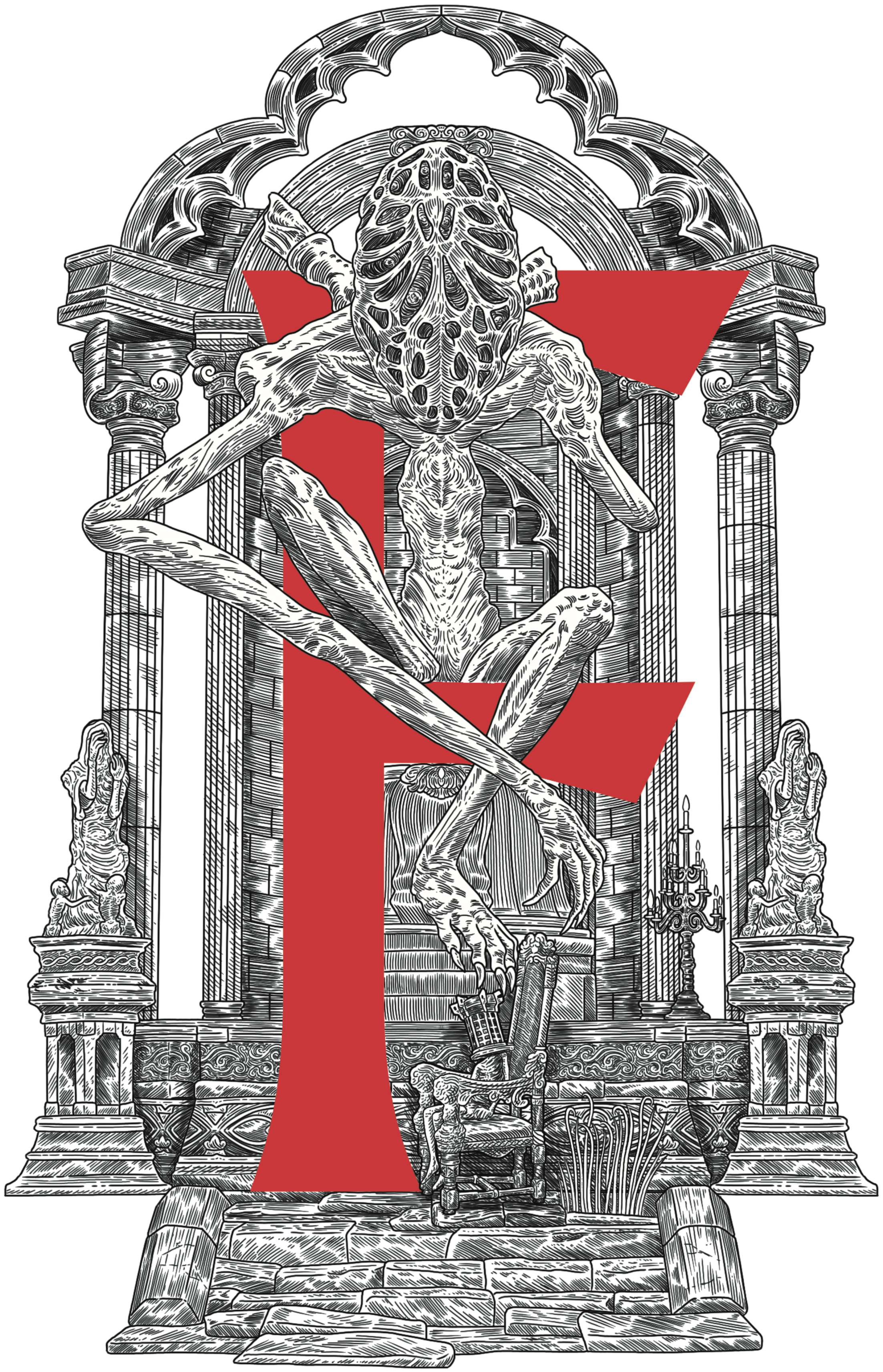
[16] Bogost, *Play Anything*, 57, 81.

for being able to be lost at any moment: *Bloodborne* makes "grinding" fun by giving it teeth, by using perpetual danger to keep it from devolving into mindless repetition. Most of all, I could sing the praises of the game's superb combat, whose tight stamina-bar management, rhythm-based dodges, and animation-locked attacks (which commit you to the duration of a weapon swing rather than allowing you to cancel out of it when under pressure) oblige the player to actually think about every single button press, and whose sheer *feel* in the hands – generated from some mysterious interaction of animation, sound design, controller feedback, and exquisitely tuned timing windows – surpasses that of nearly every competitor in the genre. And yet in dilating on these elements of ludic form, each of which doubtless represents the product of exacting attention and craft, I would simply be *reviewing the game*. In the mainstream game review – concerned not with ideas or meaning but rather, simply, with fun – the rarified aesthetic paradigms of "modernist" formal novelty and technical formalist analysis, of making it new and laying bare the device, find their purest and most natural expression. But this purified formalism renders the formalist critic obsolete. Such is the final paradox of game form: to erode formalism's authority by transforming its artistic ideal into a reality – by making its theories true.

OBJECT LESSON

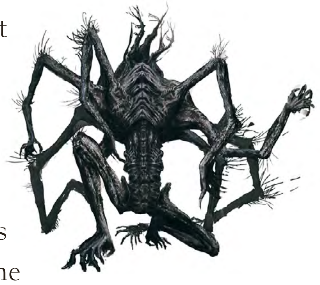
CHAPTER 7

On Institutional Horror



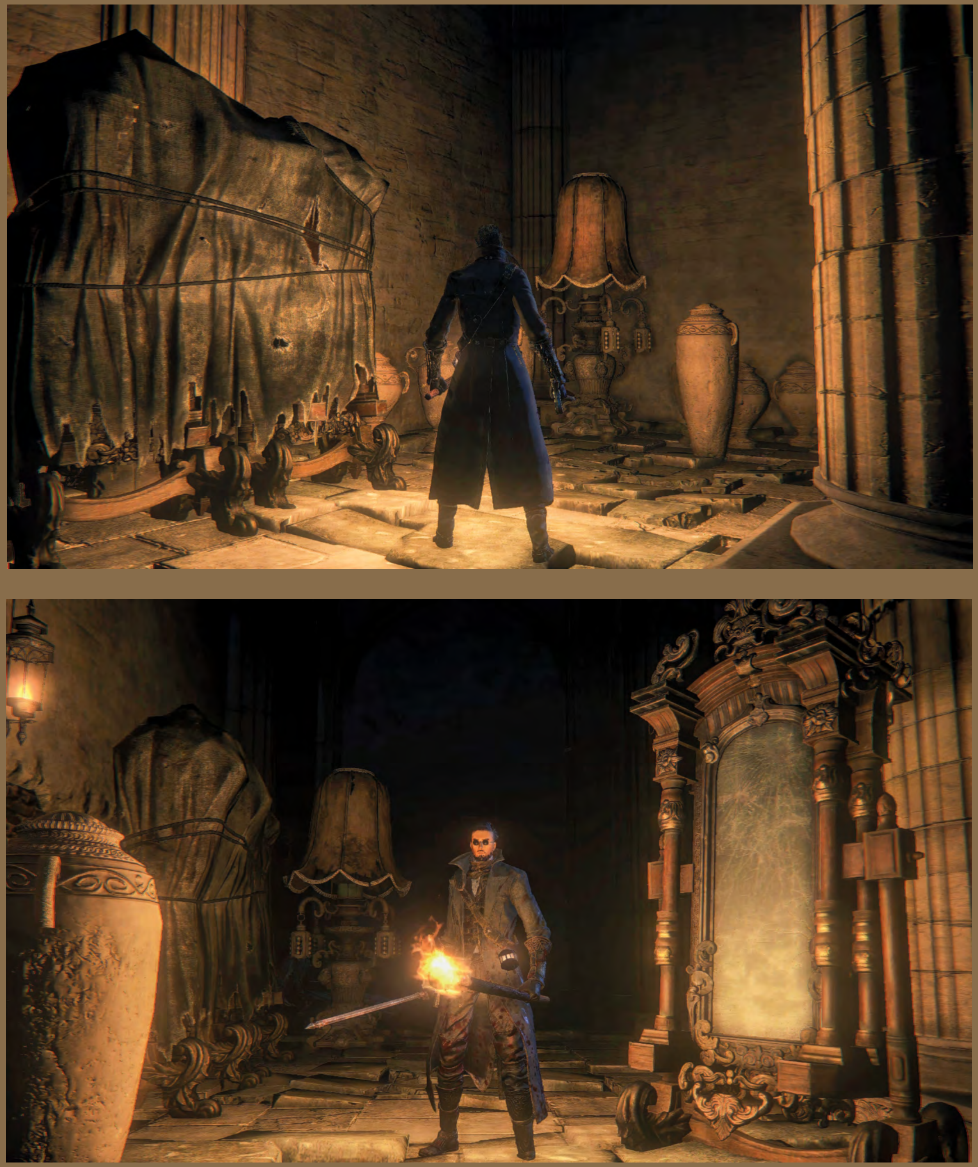
CHAPTER 7

For years, fans of the Souls games have wondered how the series might approach a science fiction setting. Yet *Bloodborne* is already sci-fi of a kind – and not just because Lovecraftian horror is, strictly speaking, a genre about space aliens. For *Bloodborne*'s creepiest moment in fact involves the strange incursion of a future world into the Victorian city of Yharnam.

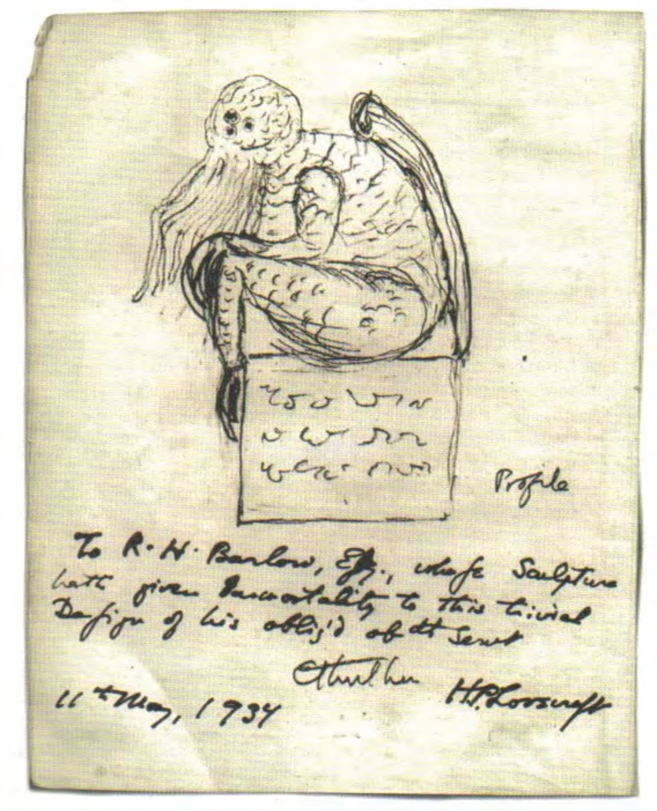


How else to explain the objects in the basement of the Hypogean Gaol? No doubt, for the player who finds their way to this forbidden section of Yharnam during the first part of the game, there is much else to unsettle. Having been surprised and killed by one of the hulking Snatcher enemies that appear throughout the city after the death of the Blood-Starved Beast, the player awakens in a jail cell (a disorienting violation of the game's rebirth mechanic) while an unseen chorus chants dissonantly in an unknown language. Venturing outside your cell, you find a nun huddled in a corner of the basement whimpering and praying for help, and in the hallway, a mummified corpse strapped to a chair with an iron cage covering its head. Upstairs, unfamiliar hunchbacked creatures scurry in the shadows while slow, heavy footsteps announce the approach of patrolling Snatchers. And in the apse of the cathedral above, one glimpses, for the first time in the game, one of Yharnam's hidden statues of a Great One – a seated Amygdala whose titanic alien form provides the first hint of the game's later swerve into full-blown cosmic horror.

Yet amid all its scares and thickened horror atmosphere, the most unsettling aspect of this environment is surely the furniture. For among the Gothic grotesquerie of this converted cathedral – skeletons, monsters, nuns, and all – one's attention is likely to pause on a truly incongruous (and thus far more uncanny) sight: a collection of ornate household lamps scattered about the basement, and what appears to be an equally robust stockpile of double-width cheval mirrors, each covered with a cloth and fastened with rope. It's as if this Cthulhu-worshipping cult enclave were also a storehouse for mass-produced late-Victorian furniture. Or as if the cultists themselves were currently in the process of some large-scale move, whether a corporate relocation or a campus-wide refurnishing of the fabled School of Mensis itself.



Why are the Mensis scholars storing a collection of identical lamps and mirrors in the basement of their church?



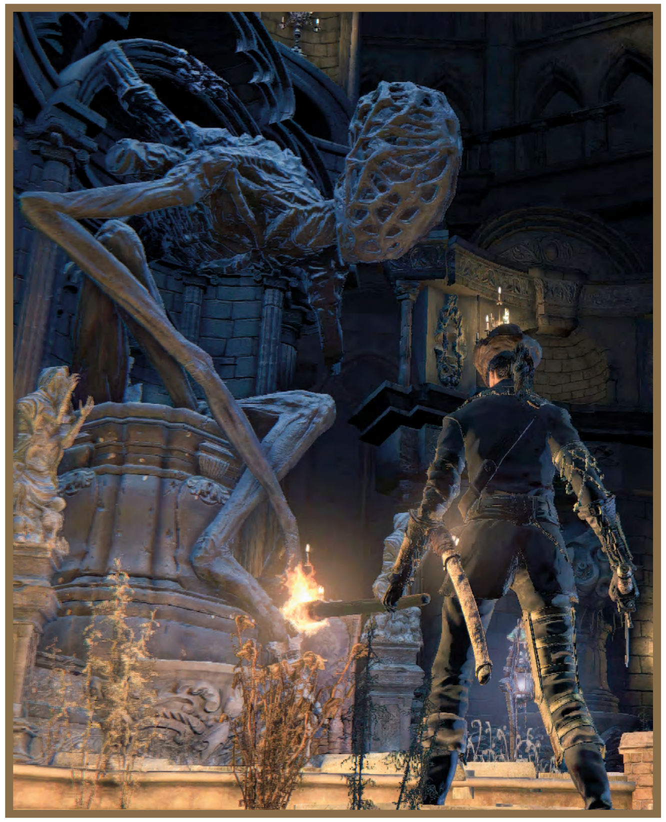
To R. H. Barlow, Esq., whoſe Sculpture hath given Immortality to this trivial Deſign of his oblig'd obt Servt

Cthulhu

H. P. Lovecraft

11th May, 1934

A 1934 sketch of the cosmic deity Cthlulhu by H. P. Lovecraft.



A statue of the eldritch deity Amygdala in a similar seated position.

Indeed, there is something essentially institutional about this junk, for only an organization on the scale of a company or a school would be interested in storing so many identical pieces of furniture. And yet such institutional logistics seem wholly alien to the archetypal Gothic horror otherwise on display.

It's therefore crucial to the surreal effect created by this space that these everyday objects are not only enigmatic in themselves (for what need does a jail have for random luxury lamps and mirrors?) but also that they repeat. Indeed, on one level we might say that this moment "motivates the device" of the repeating environmental asset, one of those near-universal distortions of reality within video game worlds that has long since become wholly naturalized. In a novel or film, not to mention in real life, it would of course be deeply unsettling to enter a stranger's house and discover a surplus of furniture, decorations, and object-configurations identical to those found in a different house on the other side of town: the same oil painting of a whaling ship, the same antique globe, the same wallpaper and carpeting, the same stack of six letters on the kitchen table, the same bookshelf with the same exact arrangement of books. And yet, due to technological and development time constraints, this sort of thing happens constantly in video game worlds.[1] *Bloodborne* itself liberally reuses environmental assets in this naturalized sense, populating its streets with the same chained-up coffins, horse carcasses, statues, and abandoned strollers, and its interiors

WHAT MAKES THE OBJECTS IN *BLOODBORNE* GENUINELY SURREAL IS THE SUBTLE TEMPORAL DISJUNCTION THAT THEY INTRODUCE

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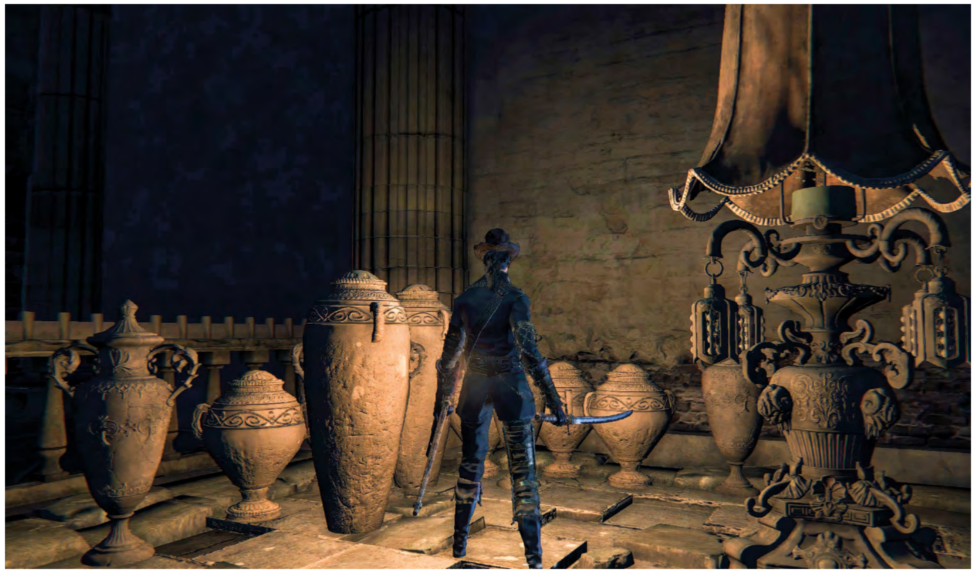
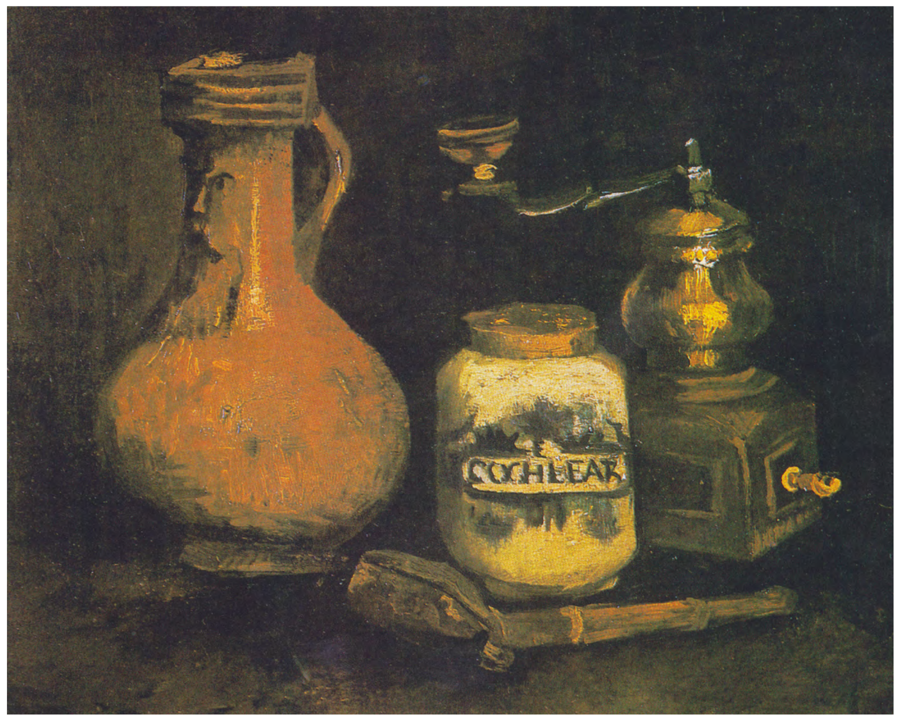
[1] In a 2010 *New Yorker* essay that recounts his experience playing video games for the first time, Nicholson Baker describes finding a repeated bookshelf asset while exploring a house on the Russian border in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*: "I found many interesting things while exploring this house … In the master bedroom were books on a bookshelf, including 'The Jungle Book,' a law treatise, and what appeared to be a biography of the Dutch painter Gerard van Honthorst. I'd seen these same books back in northern Virginia, during a break in the frantic action there, before the bloodbath at Burger Town."



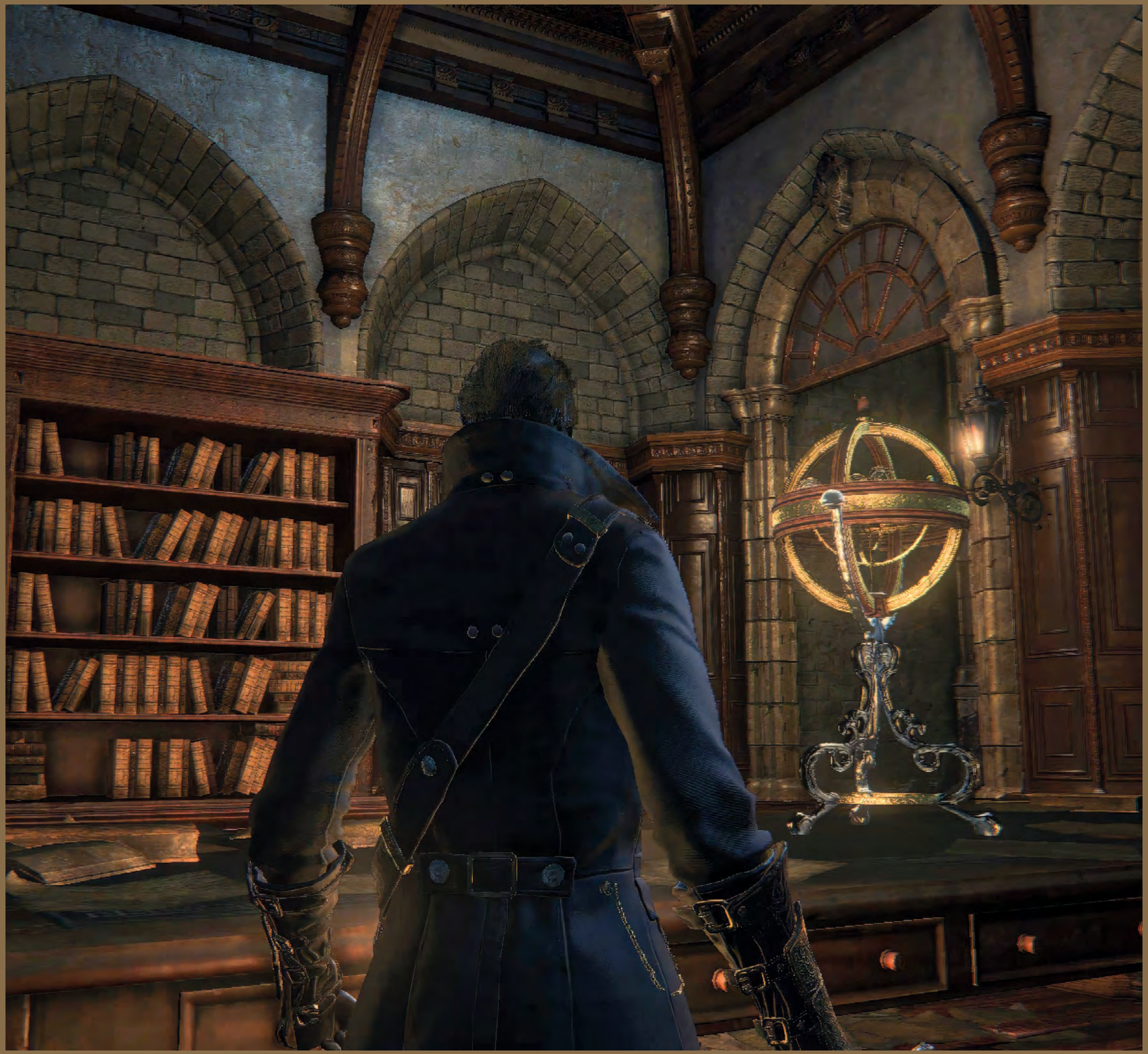
Modern video games often contain artfully composed arrangements of everyday objects that form a distant cousin to the balanced tableaus of still-life paintings. The key difference, though, is that in games the exact same objects – and sometimes, even the exact same arrangements – may reappear uncannily all over the gameworld.

with the same laboratory cabinets, orreries, and jars of preserved eyeballs. But the lamps and mirrors in the Hypogean Gaol differ in that their repetition seems intentional within the fiction itself, even though the actual nature of that intention is opaque. In this respect the cloth covering the mirrors is the key detail, since it implies an explicit desire to preserve the object, and thus justifies the collective presence of all these incongruous pieces by securing what we might call a thematized aesthetics of storage. This implied motivation shifts the force of our judgment of incongruity from the work itself to the world of the fiction: instead of being the product of some unhinged level designer copy-pasting random assets without concern for environmental coherence, they become the sign of a diegetic intention that seems no less deranged.

Ultimately, however, what makes these objects genuinely surreal is the subtle temporal disjunction that they introduce. For it's not just that



Still Life with Coffee Mill, Pipe Case and Jug, 1884
by Vincent van Gogh



I've counted at least seven copies of this orrery in *Bloodborne*, along with several more miniature models. There's also a giant version hanging from the ceiling at Byrgenwerth College. It's quite a popular design.

the electric floor lamps seem perhaps a little ahead of their time: to my knowledge, no buildings in Yharnam actually use lamps like these, but instead rely on older forms of lighting like candles or wall-mounted gas lamps. More jarringly, these near-future lamps seem to hail from an even more distant era when such mass-produced commodities would themselves become mere junk. For arranged thus – unsystematically, in a basement, among other random items (including, quite strangely, several Grecian-looking urns) – they read precisely as cast-off objects. The creepiness of the Hypogean Gaol is thus not that of the classical Gothic, despite the area's wholesale embrace of its tropes, but rather the creepiness of an old institutional building whose basement and storerooms are packed haphazardly with defunct bits of standardized furniture. If this space is meant to be a lumber room, it is so only in the Kafkaesque – not the Victorian – sense of the term. [2] And yet, relative to *Bloodborne*'s 19th-century setting, the advent of such spaces would seem to lie somewhere in the future. Here surreality thus hinges on a historical distortion: the Hypogean Gaol disturbs our sense of *Bloodborne*'s world by stuffing its Gothic house of horrors with the detritus of a modernity that hasn't happened yet.

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[2] I'm thinking of *The Trial* here, but some lines from Adorno on Kafka also seem appropriate: "[S]habbiness in Kafka ... is the cryptogram of capitalism's highly polished, glittering late phase, which he excludes in order to define it all the more precisely in its negative ... Kafka unmasks monopolism by focusing on the waste-products of the liberal era that it liquidates" ("*Notes on Kafka*," 256-57).

DIFFICULTY

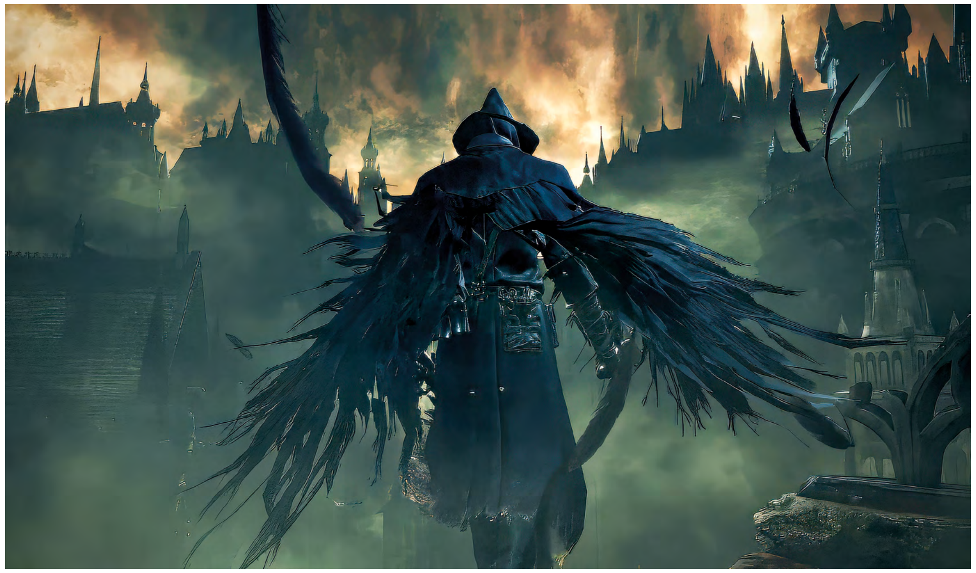
CHAPTER 8

On Modernist Art

CHAPTER 8

It's often said that Souls games seem curiously uninterested in the player's presence. Whereas most modern action games crowd the player with obtrusive tutorials on each individual gameplay mechanic, with scripted encounters and responses from the gameworld tailored to the player's actions, and with dynamic hints, suggestions, and – yes – difficulty options, Souls games, as one critic has put it, often seem like they're "shrugging." [1]

They make almost no effort to guide the player, neither explaining their complex mechanics nor even offering basic instructions – beyond the occasional terse, optional note discoverable within the gameworld – about what to do, where to go, and how you're supposed to play. Further, their virtual worlds themselves often function autonomously at a godlike remove. They will kill the player swiftly and brutally, of course, but like nature, they do so without malice and without self-consciousness. Even the most miserable, relentlessly lethal areas in the series – *Demon's Souls*' Swamp of Sorrow, in which poisonous, waist-deep sludge restricts the player's movement while disease-ridden insects swarm your flesh and giant, one-hit-kill-threatening goblins loom suddenly out of the dark, or *Bloodborne*'s Upper Cathedral Ward, wherein the player sneaks through pitch-black hallways around shambling eldritch horrors able to freeze you in place and kill you instantly – still maintain a serene neutrality, as if the constant death they dole out were merely a natural and wholly impersonal consequence of the player's misguided decision to venture there in the first place. (In Souls, unlike nearly every other action-adventure game, dangerous places are actually dangerous.) At the same time, although such locations are often taken to exemplify the series' infamous (and erroneously named) "masocore" challenge, the rigorous predictability of the threats in Souls – enemies and environmental hazards will always appear in the same place and behave in the exact same way – means that they are just as easy to exploit. [2] The laws of the Souls universe are inflexible whether they work against the player's advantage or towards it. Just as the games make no attempt save you from frustration or despair in the face of repeated death, so also do they receive your cheap, exploitative tactics – bombarding their weirdly unresponsive enemies with pinprick-dealing arrows from across a chasm for five minutes straight, luring large monsters toward impassable doors and whaling on them from the other side – with a kind of lordly indifference. The viability of "cheesing" is the flipside of their disinterested lethality.



Eileen the Crow is one of the deadliest enemies you can face in the early hours of *Bloodborne*. Fortunately, this NPC is friendly. Unfortunately, those wishing to play the majority of the game using her exquisite Blade of Mercy weapon will need to kill her anyway.

Perhaps no figure in the series exemplifies this dynamic so well as *Bloodborne*'s Eileen the Crow. A deadly assassin with whom the player can cooperate at a few points throughout the game, Eileen can first be found standing watch on a secret terrace in Central Yharnam overlooking an aqueduct that runs beneath the Great Bridge. Most players who encounter her here will exhaust her limited dialogue and move on. However, if the player chooses to engage Eileen in combat – whether out of paranoia, sheer belligerence, or the wish to claim her

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[1] See Adam Smith, "Dark Souls' Uncompromising Design Leaves No Space for an Easy Mode."

[2] As Smith writes in the essay cited above: "AI, enemy placement, combat animations … [are] all predictable, to the extent that you can exploit every element, and as soon as you die, most enemies will walk away as if getting back to their patrol route is far more important and taxing than vanquishing some kind of sun-praising hero. They're more concerned with fulfilling their eternal function in the world, whatever that might be, than dealing with distractions."

LIKE EILEEN, *BLOODBORNE* IS NEITHER VENGEFUL NOR CRUEL: IT SIMPLY TURNS ITS BACK TO YOU

unique Blade of Mercy weapon – one suffers not only a permanent, premature end to her questline, but also the likely prospect of a speedy death, as she dances around the player delivering swift, devastating slashes while pelting them with high-damage throwing knives whenever they stop to heal. In both her extreme deadliness and the potential for accidental, irreversible story consequences that she represents, Eileen exemplifies one half of the Souls series' dominant disposition: its way of punishing the slightest mistakes both instantly and without ceremony. Equally emblematic, however, is the fact that neither the game nor Eileen herself betray the slightest interest in rubbing salt in your wounds. For not only does she, like most Souls enemies, clearly take no pleasure in your death, but upon reviving and returning to the site of your defeat, you will nevertheless find her restored to her original pose, gazing pensively upon the city without a thought for self-defense, and thus freely allowing you to begin each rematch with a powerful sneak attack from behind. Like Eileen, *Bloodborne* is neither vengeful nor cruel: it simply turns its back to you.

* * *

Following the art historian Michael Fried, I want to call this disposition modernist. [3] Across several influential critical works, Fried elaborates a theory of what he calls "absorption," an aesthetic effect whose history begins in 18th-century French painting but which also becomes characteristic of modernist art in particular. In brief, absorption is a form of total immersion in a work of art that arises from that work's negation of the viewer's presence. Unlike "theatrical" art – works that directly address the viewer or even beg for their attention – absorptive works beckon the viewer more fully into their imaginary spaces precisely ignoring them. As Fried writes, "only by establishing the fiction of [the beholder's] absence or nonexistence [can] his actual placement before and enthrallment by the painting be secured." [4] In 18th-century paintings like Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *The Father of a Family Reading the Bible to His Children* (1755), this impersonal posture is often embodied on the literal level by figures who are absorbed in some task, such as work or reading, and thus seem oblivious of the viewer. But Fried also seems to be describing a fundamental disposition that transcends literal content: nonrepresentational modernist works can be similarly absorptive by cultivating a more general, abstract air of unselfconsciousness, impersonality, and reticence. The important thing is the disposition itself: whether literally (in certain 18th-century paintings) or figuratively (in modernism), the absorptive work turns its back to you. [5]

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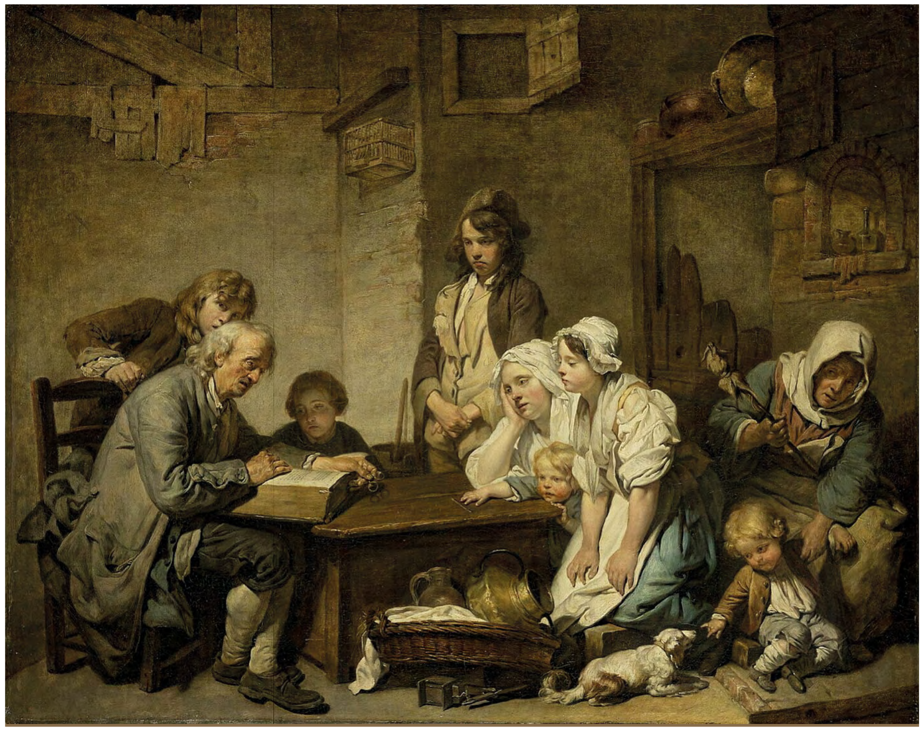
[3] The comparison I draw between Souls games and modernist art in the remainder of this chapter incorporates material from an essay on *Dark Souls* and modernism, "Can a Video Game Express Modernist Values?", that I published at the *Los Angeles Review of Books* on October 31, 2020. On modernism and Souls, see also David Chandler's essay "Bloodborne and the History of Horror," which likewise links the game to modernism – though largely on account of its genre influences rather than its difficulty or form. Whereas for Chandler *Dark Souls* reconstitutes a bygone aesthetic of "gothic romanticism," *Bloodborne*'s debt to the ambiguous, experimental fictions of H. P. Lovecraft makes it "[Miyazaki's] take on modernism, a confusing experiment of genres that attempts to access something new."

Despite being about an entirely different medium, Fried's concept of absorption provides a useful framework for *Bloodborne* in that it seems to capture exactly the paradox that fans of the Souls series are registering when they note its strange impersonality, its way of treating the player "as an incidental creature." [6] Granted, some may object that



In his book *Absorption and Theatricality*, Michael Fried offers Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *The Father of a Family Reading the Bible to His Children* (1755) as an example of an "absorptive" work: a painting whose representation of figures absorbed in some activity models the viewer's own enthrallment before the canvas.

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[4] See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, 103.

[5] Fredric Jameson puts the modernist resonance of Fried's absorptive artwork in especially clear terms, writing that Fried sees "the modernist moment of absorption" as "the very logic of modernism itself as it more and more turns away from its spectators" (*The Antinomies of Realism*, 176).

[6] Smith uses this phrase in "Dark Souls' Uncompromising Design Leaves No Space for an Easy Mode."

the curious attraction of this attitude indicates a mere perversity on the player's part, an unhealthy infatuation born precisely from the feeling of being ignored, scorned, or humiliated. (And make no mistake, the series certainly has elements of a masochistic aesthetic. For instance, among the typical lineup of RPG starting classes – warrior, mage, etc. – one can also begin *Bloodborne* as an anemic, statistically deficient "Waste of Flesh": "You are nothing," the description of this class reads, "Talentless. You shouldn't have been born.")[7] Yet such explanations ultimately distort the actual experience of this impersonality, which depends not on a studiously maintained aloofness from the player's interest and desire – the acute self-consciousness of shutting someone out – but rather on an arresting, and far stranger, feeling of genuine neutrality. (Souls games are alien but not alienating.) Actually, the main force of this impersonality is positive rather than negative, and aligns roughly with Fried's framework: it is precisely because the game maintains a fundamental distance from the player that we're able to get so lost in it. Like the actual world, it obeys its laws infallibly, without apparent concern for the player's choices and preferences, and thus ultimately comes to seem, for all the flagrant artificiality of its forms, something close to real.

Fried's theory, however, also resonates with *Bloodborne* on a more general level, in that it suggests a new way of thinking about the game's difficulty and that of the Souls series more broadly. Although difficulty is not a significant concept for Fried, the paradoxical stance that defines his notion of absorption – a turning away that draws the viewer in – offers a useful model for conceptualizing difficulty positively without defaulting to moralizing or aspirational terms. This is something that current discourse on Souls badly needs. For in another striking echo of modernism, the notorious difficulty of the Souls games, coupled with the developers' refusal to add an "easy mode" option (as has become the norm for most single-player games), has frequently raised complaints that they are elitist and exclusionary; and the resulting debates, while interesting, have proven deeply unproductive. Certainly, there is something prima facie absurd about the moral insistence that the developers alter the internal form of their creation in order to accommodate the maximum number of players – an argument made about no other art form. *Ulysses* doesn't have an easy mode, nor does *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and even in the case of a less obviously "aesthetic" form like a crossword puzzle, it would be highly unusual to demand that the author of a given puzzle also provide, not simply an easier puzzle, but an easier version of the same puzzle. Here the comparative ease of the "fix" is irrelevant: the issue at stake is not the additional labor required to make the work more accessible (a matter of adjusting a few sliders, of giving the player extra health, etc.), but a more fundamental question about whether difficulty can constitute an intended aspect of a work's experience without opening its creator to moral censure. There have always been difficult artworks – why should games be any different?

PABLO PICASSO

One might object, however, that a comparison to difficulty in other art forms is misleading. To start, one could follow modernism's own cue and argue that ludic challenge in video games has none of the aesthetic or intellectual "content" of the difficulty found in, say, a poem by Gertrude Stein, and thus doesn't warrant the same moral protection. Whereas champions of modernism such as George Steiner often justified artistic difficulty on philosophical grounds – arguing, for instance, that it forces us to consider basic questions about language

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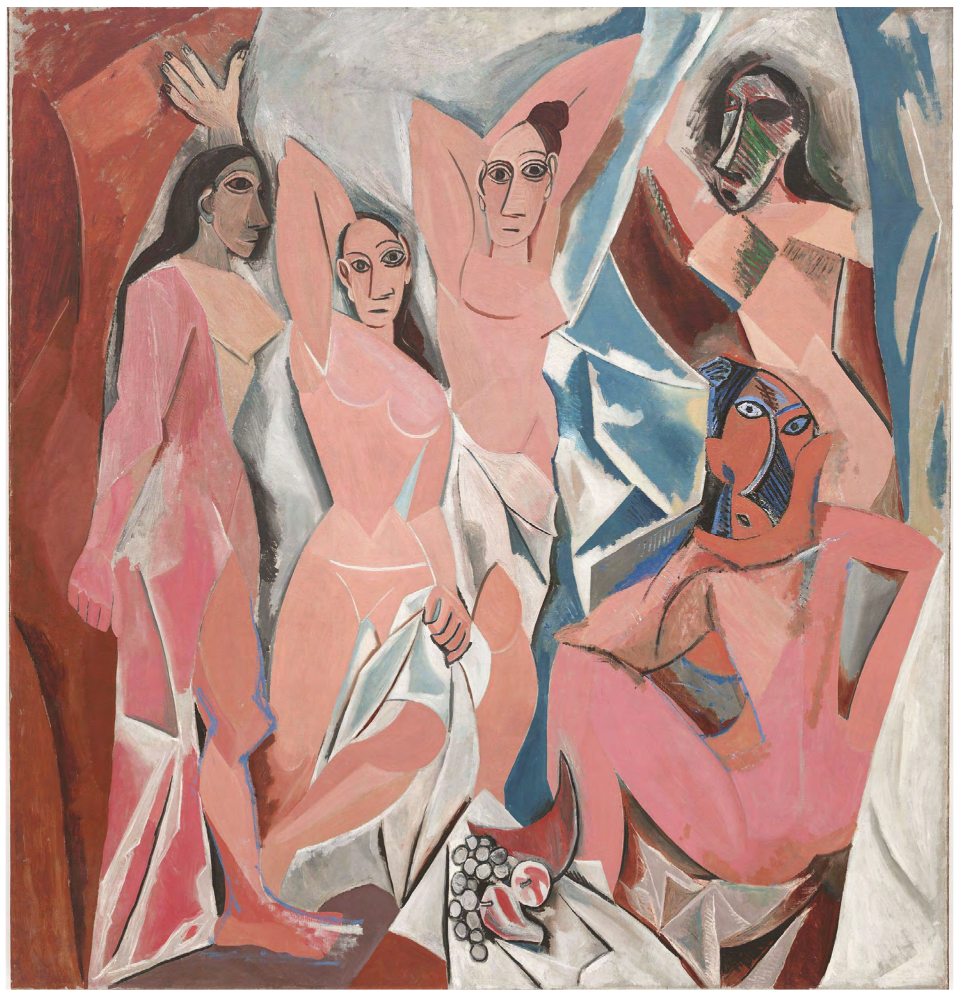
[7] On sadomasochism as a mode of "affective difficulty" in games, see *Jagoda, Experimental Games*, 210-16.



Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) shocked many of his contemporaries and still challenges viewers today. One wonders what it would mean to give this painting an "easy mode."

or meaning as such – the challenge of a game like *Bloodborne* ultimately boils down to a matter of killing animated monsters. [8] Granted, such elevated claims for the inherent value of modernist difficulty are also complicated by the fact that during its heyday modernism was often dogged by the critique that its difficulty was precisely akin to that of a game, such as a crossword or picture puzzle. [9] In other words, whereas critics of the Souls games' purported elitism might begin by asserting a categorical distinction between ludic and "modernist" difficulty, many of the earliest critics of modernism's purported elitism argued that these are in fact the same thing.

Yet even a crossword or a picture puzzle does not make the same demands on a player's physical ability as *Bloodborne* – does not so starkly divide players who are able to finish from those who can't – and thus one might finally argue that the crucial difference between gameplay challenge and other kinds of difficulty in art is that only in games does skill level represent an impassable barrier, not just to experiencing the work in its totality, but to engaging with it in a basic sense, to seeing anything beyond the opening minutes of a 30- to 40-hour journey. In this respect, our imagined moral critic might argue, gameplay challenge most resembles that of performance: of playing a sport or a difficult piece of music, that is, activities in which one's technical or physical aptitude firmly determines whether one gets to have the experience in the first place. Given this difference, the moral critic might therefore ask: does such a performative demand really count as artistic difficulty? Even if produces a work of art (say, a performance of Bach's piano fugue in C Minor) can it really form an aesthetic component of a work of art?

This is obviously a complicated question. Rather than pursuing it here, however, let us simply note that if the moral critic were to

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[8] See George Steiner's classic essay "On Difficulty," especially 273-76.

[9] See Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism*, especially 73-74, 134, 145, 157-58.

T. S. ELIOT

THE WASTE LAND
T.S. ELIOT

answer in the negative – by whatever arguments they choose – then the critique of ludic difficulty becomes easier to make. For concluding that such a performative requirement can be an aesthetic element – an essential, intended experience of a given work – then forces one to explain why we don't make the same moral complaint about other (necessarily exclusionary) "skill checks" found in difficult artworks, such as *The Waste Land's* demand that we read Latin, Greek, German, Italian, French, and Sanskrit, or *Finnegans Wake's* demand that we derive meaning from sentences that don't make conventional grammatical or referential sense. One could, of course, evade this bind by claiming that difficulty is in fact not a valid – and morally protected – axis of artistic expression, but I've yet to see a moral critic make this argument, and I doubt that many would. (Some occasionally try to have it both ways, arguing that such an artistic intention is valid but that Souls games nevertheless need easy modes, but this position is incoherent: saying the intention is valid means precisely that it can't be contradicted on moral grounds, even if the resulting work ends up being genuinely exclusionary or, indeed, artistically impoverished.) Accepting difficulty as a morally permissible effect in art thus poses problems for any critique of ludic difficulty that insists on viewing it as an artistic element. This is why denying ludic difficulty's aesthetic claim altogether makes things smoother. If difficult gameplay bears no relation to the experience of difficult art, then one is free to adjudicate it like other (non-artistic) forms of play: like youth sports leagues, for instance, which ought to make every possible effort to accommodate as many different skill levels as possible. Of all the moral arguments against ludic difficulty, I find this one the most coherent. But it must be emphasized again that this argument requires sundering gameplay challenge absolutely from the realm of the aesthetic. And truth be told, I'm skeptical that many of the same moral critics would be willing to take this step.

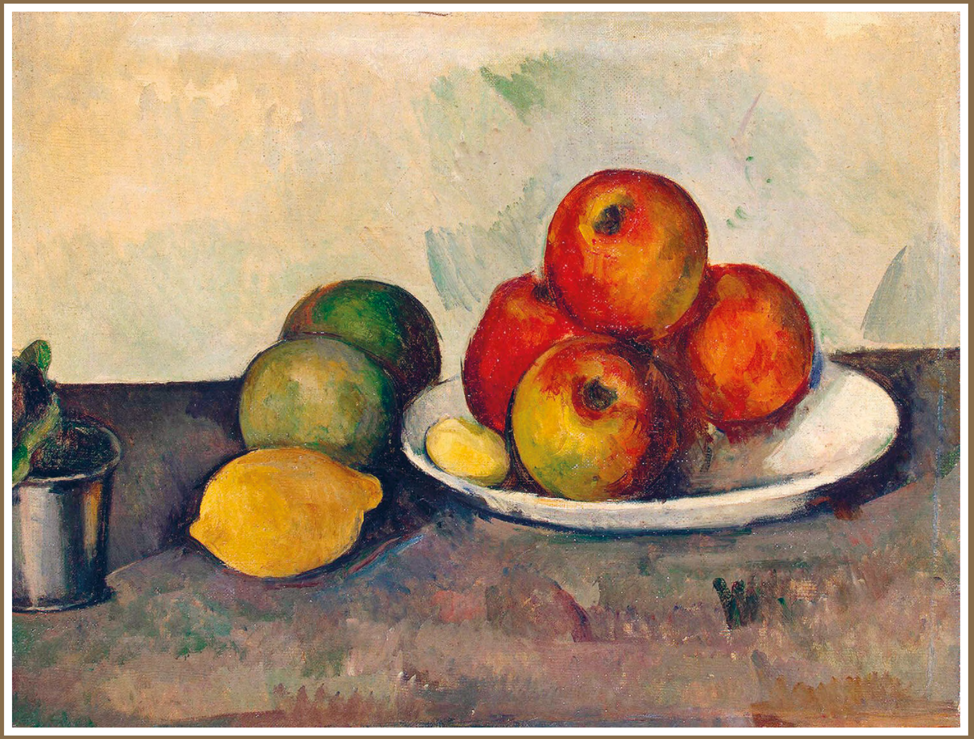
Meanwhile, the arguments in defense of the Souls games' difficulty don't fare much better, and can be summarized more quickly. For they tend to emphasize a single, highly specific experience: the agonizing struggle with one of the series' difficult boss enemies, and the unmatched euphoria upon finally prevailing. In such accounts, the argument is invariably that you can't have the latter without the former. Difficulty in Souls, these critics claim, is valuable and necessary precisely because it occasions triumph. Only by being forced to transcend your own limits will you experience the unique exhilaration that these games have to offer; and giving players the option to make such encounters easier whenever they hit a wall, as every Souls player will at some point, is to rob them of this rare thrill.

Such arguments, however, are unconvincing. For not only are they reductive – boss battles, though doubtless a great source of the Souls games' challenge, make up only a small fraction of their total gameplay – but they also empty difficulty of any artistic purpose or meaning beyond itself. Difficulty, here conscripted to pure aspirationalism, becomes its own justification: such arguments are akin to saying that *Ulysses* needs to be hard because otherwise you wouldn't experience the satisfaction of actually finishing it. This view instrumentalizes gameplay difficulty into a mere tool for self-actualization and thereby elides its specificity to the individual work of art. For one could make the same argument about any aspirational challenge, be it climbing a mountain or learning a difficult piece on the piano. As satisfying as such experiences may be, they constitute a feeble

grounds for ludic difficulty insofar as they depend on an extremely limiting conception of gameplay pleasure that will fail to sway anyone not already sold on the value of completing tough challenges just for the sake of it. To the argument that the difficulty of the Souls games is “good for you” because it’ll make victory all the sweeter, one could simply respond: I don’t play games to test my own limits. I don’t play games to find out if I’m skilled enough to beat them.

* * *

Taken on its own terms, Fried’s theory does not offer a solution to this impasse. (Indeed, my intention in sketching out these arguments is precisely to suggest that no solution is possible, since I see no way to square the two propositions: *(1)* art is allowed to be difficult, and *(2)* video games are art.) What it does provide, however, is an alternate way of framing the whole issue by relating the Souls games to modernism in particular. For I take it as given that Joyce, Stein, or Picasso would never argue that their works are hard just for the sake of promoting an eventual feeling of achievement. Nor, I think, would many modernists try to valorize difficulty in and of itself as a negative experience. Rather, in a way roughly analogous to Fried’s notion of absorption, the negativity of modernist artworks is often inherently bound up with a fundamentally positive impulse, a kind of basic optimism about art that might seem curiously old-fashioned from today’s perspective. This is in fact one of the most striking features of modernist aesthetics. Time and again, we see the most radical formal experiments being justified on the most traditional grounds, whether that be some “naively” representational ambition (Cubism wished to show how we really see) or an enthusiastic embrace of a given medium’s unique potential (modernist poetry explores the pure texture and sound of language; abstract art explores the essential flatness of the canvas).



Still Life With Apples (c. 1890) by Paul Cézanne.

Moreover, this basic conventionality is often borne out in our instinctive responses to modernist artworks. It's no accident that some readers still tear up at the end of *Ulysses*, or that other readers find *Mrs. Dalloway* incredibly romantic. For all its formal negativity, a modernist novel still wants at its core to be a good novel: it still believes wholeheartedly in things like plot, character, emotions, and representation. And the same is true for other mediums. You might very well hang a print of a Cezanne painting in your apartment not out of snobbery or a desire to edify yourself but rather because, on a basic level, the colors just look nice. Such "vulgar" enjoyment is by no means a side effect of these otherwise experimental works. On the contrary, it speaks to a basic intention of the works themselves, one that indeed often goes hand in hand with their very resistance to established forms and styles, that is, with the very resistance that makes them "difficult." Modernist difficulty belies a hard kernel of pleasure.

It's in this respect, finally, that I like to think of the Souls games as "modernist." Not because they reference actual modernist art in any way – thankfully, they're beyond such shallow bids for high-culture seriousness – nor because of their pure deviance or negativity (no doubt, there exist games that are far more experimental and difficult: Souls games unequivocally remain a form of entertainment), but rather for this more diffuse, abstract, and again dispositional quality, whereby every negative moment, every instance of bewildering taciturnity or spikiness, ultimately serves to enhance the most conventional gaming thrills. This quality permeates nearly every aspect of their design. Their fantasy worlds are genuinely dangerous, for instance, not because they wish to punish or educate the player, to shake them out of the complacency instilled by other mass-market single-player adventures, but rather because this fact forces you to play your role – to creep slowly forward, alert to the slightest noise, when exploring a pitch-black cave, to check for ambushes when walking through every door, to feel genuine awe and terror at the sight of a titanic boss monster – in a way that most so-called role-playing games utterly fail to.[10] Immersion, that timeworn slogan of single-player game design, is thus the very endpoint of the series' unusual hostility.[11]

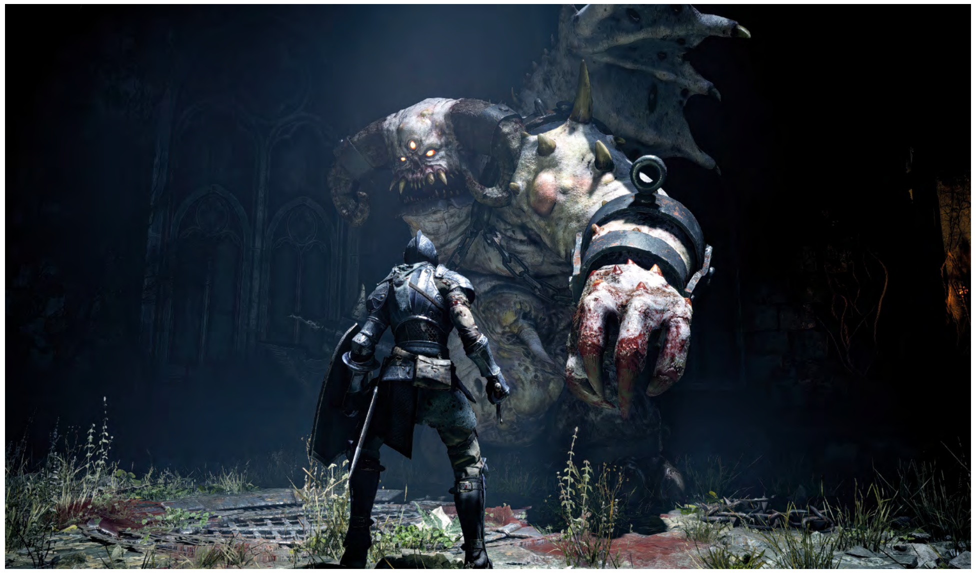
Likewise, the permanent loss of currency upon death, and the inability to undo one's mistakes, lends every decision a rare meaning (Souls translator Ryan Morris has remarked, rightly, that *Dark Souls* "put the significance of things that were happening back into games"), and thus places you in the shoes of your avatar far more successfully than

[10] Thus Brad Galloway writes in his review of the original *Demon's Souls*: "when any given situation seems potentially dangerous, it's foolhardy to walk straight into unknown circumstances. Dark rooms are prime territory for enemies to hide in shadows and pounce from behind, and patches of ground scorched black by flame are likely unsafe places to stand. The game actually asks players to think very carefully about the nature of their surroundings in order to survive. In effect, it's crucial for participants in *Demon's Souls* ... to actually *play their role*. Once this impossible-to-overstate fact is understood, players willing to take its burden will be amply rewarded."

[11] Marie-Laure Ryan observes how immersion can similarly arise from our experience with difficult literature: "There is no point in denying that the worlds of the stereotyped texts of popular culture are the most favorable to immersion: the reader can bring in more knowledge and sees more expectations fulfilled than in a text that cultivates a sense of estrangement. But immersion can also be the result of a process that involves an element of struggle and discovery. How many of us, after finally turning the last page of a difficult novel, compulsively return to the first page with the exhilarating thought that deciphering is over and the fun can now begin? In literature as in other domains – ballet, music, theater, and sports – it is through hard work that we reach the stage of effortless performance. The most forbidding textual worlds may thus afford the 'easy' pleasures of immersion, once the reader has put in the necessary concentration" (*Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 97). We can note that Ryan's evocation of turning right back to the beginning of a difficult book, so as to now enjoy it with a sense of mastery – "the fun can now begin" – also makes her passage an apt description of the experience of playing New Game Plus in a Souls game.

any hackneyed attempts at characterological motivation or psychological interiority. [12] The emphasis on boss battles by Souls difficulty advocates therefore misses the point: nearly everything "fun" about the series is linked to a design choice that makes the games more challenging than the norm. In this sense, Souls games are hard much in the way that a novel like *Ulysses* is hard. They strip away many of the interactive supports we're used to, introduce a new set of formal rules, and add a rapidly escalating challenge to boot. (Like the "Proteus" chapter in *Ulysses*, Father Gascoigne shows up at the end of *Bloodborne's* first section and likely accounts for a great percentage of permanent rage quits.) But if you accept the work's alien logic on its own terms, you soon discover that it's merely an interface for isolating and revitalizing wholly familiar aesthetic effects. In *Ulysses*, these are the pleasures of comedic dialogue, ravishing literary description ("Buck Mulligan slit a steaming scone in two and plastered butter over its smoking pith"), and a lyrical story about marital infidelity. [13] In Souls, they are the pleasures of exploring a beautiful, detailed, and mysterious 3D realm, identifying fully with your avatar, and mastering one of the most exquisite melee combat systems ever conceived.

To be sure, noting this parallel doesn't solve the problem of difficulty, insofar as one sees it as a problem. The production of such pleasures still assumes a norm of reception – an "intended experience" – from which certain players will necessarily deviate, just as *Ulysses*, for different reasons, may simply leave readers bored, angry, or defeated. (All art is normative in this way.) But it nevertheless helps shift the discussion of difficulty toward a separate – and to me far more interesting – dialectic, whereby, as in modernism, what is difficult in Souls works largely to intensify the very pleasures we've been having in video games all along. In their radical return to action-RPG basics, the Souls games are nothing if not "classical" (a telling buzzword of modernism); and in their inhospitable, opaque, and endlessly absorbing worlds, they give us exactly what a series like *God of War*, *Assassin's Creed*, or *The Legend of Zelda* gives us – only better. The Souls games are modernist because they're traditional.



The hulking Vanguard boss emerges from the gloom in Bluepoint's 2020 remake of FromSoftware's *Demon's Souls*. As Brad Galloway notes in his ecstatic review of the original game from 2009, *Demon's Souls* generates immersion precisely by asking the player to take its dangers seriously.

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[12] As quoted in Killingsworth and MacDonald, *You Died: The Dark Souls Companion*, 183.

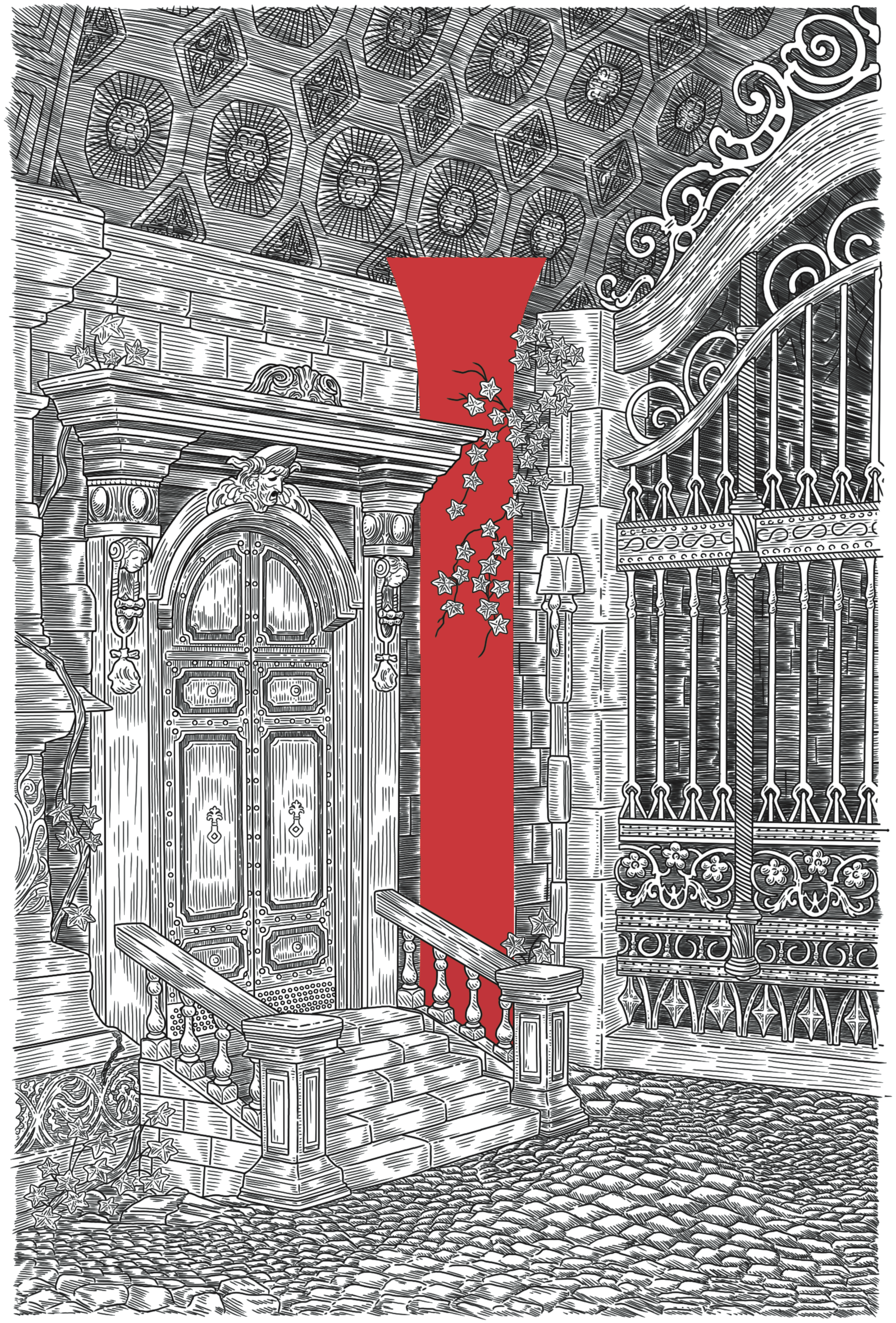
[13] Leo Bersani notes the quite traditional novelistic pleasures evoked by Leopold Bloom and his wife Molly in *Ulysses*: "The Blooms are an identifiable couple, and it is an extraordinary tribute to Joyce's power of realistic evocation that all the fancy narrative techniques of *Ulysses* are unable to dim the vivid presence of Poldy and Molly" ("*Against Ulysses*," 157).

ORS

DOO

CHAPTER 9

On Annoyance



CHAPTER 9

In video games, it's often the most quotidian aspects of physical reality that pose the greatest challenge to representation. Doors are a case in point. As one recent article puts it, doors in games "are often synonymous with a massive design headache."[1] Indeed, in 2014 the designer Liz England wrote a blog post that seeks to convey the difficulties of game development solely by enumerating the many challenges of implementing doors that the player can open and close.[2]

Doors create problems both for pure representation (should the door open one way or two ways? if the door can be pulled open, does the player's character model need to back up, or will the door clip through their body? does the door open automatically when you approach, or do the designers need to animate your avatar actually turning a knob?) and for gameplay (do enemies know how to use them? does opening a door lock you into an animation or do you retain control?). For this reason, even the most technically lavish games still employ various shortcuts that abstract doors from their normal behavior in life. Many games, for instance, allow all interactable doors to swing open away from the avatar in both directions, saloon-style, so as to avoid the more spatially complex problem of designing a pulling animation. In *The Last of Us Part II*, one of the most graphically lifelike games of all time, your avatar's interactions with doors are fully animated, but during combat scenarios all doors gradually close of their own accord, to save you the frustration of being trapped in an animation while fleeing enemies. [3] And the long-running *Assassin's Creed* series – developed by Ubisoft, the company for which Liz England was working at the time of her post – for many years presented massive, astoundingly detailed 3D worlds devoid of usable doors. [4] Despite incredible advances in rendering technology, doors in video games remain a widely acknowledged mimetic problem.

It's less often noted, however, that doors sometimes present similarly

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[1] Megan Farokhmanesh, "Why Game Developers Can't Get a Handle on Doors."
[2] This post was republished with England's permission at *Kotaku* in 2016.
[3] Farokhmanesh, "Why Game Developers Can't Get a Handle on Doors."
[4] The game designer Stephan Hövelbrinks notes this in a 2021 tweet: "Doors are complicated to have in games and have all sorts of possible bugs. Mostly because they're a dynamic funnel and block in the pathfinding, potentially locked, potentially destructible, but in general because they sit potentially between any game interaction or character to character situation from here to there. AAA devs hate them, too. The *Assassin's Creed* series, otherwise full of stuff, doesn't have them." Stephan Hövelbrinks (@talecrafter), Twitter, March 8, 2021 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://twitter.com/talecrafter/status/1369153361270935554.

A still from Orson Welles's 1962 film adaptation of *The Trial.* Kafka's novel contains a parable about a man who tries to gain admittance to the Law but is stopped by a doorkeeper guarding a door, who informs him that behind this door there are many more, each guarded by doorkeeper more powerful than the last – an apt distillation of a Souls game's essential structure.

acute representational paradoxes in other mediums. Consider, for instance, this passage from George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, which describes the protagonist Dorothea entering her room after a depressing wedding trip overseas:

> *Mr and Mrs Casaubon, returning from their wedding journey, arrived at Lowick Manor in the middle of January. A light snow was falling as they descended at the door, and in the morning, when Dorothea passed from her dressing-room into the blue-green boudoir that we know of, she saw the long avenue of limes lifting their trunks from a white earth, and spreading white branches against the dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank in uniform whiteness and low-hanging uniformity of cloud. The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books. The bright fire of dry oak-boughs burning on the logs seemed an incongruous renewal of life and glow——like the figure of Dorothea herself as she entered carrying the red-leather cases containing the cameos for Celia.* [5]

I have written elsewhere about his passage, both as an example of negative form and – for that very reason – as a potential interpretive magnet. [6] For now, though, I simply want to note how it is a *doorway* in particular that produces the passage's weird mimetic disjunction. At the beginning of the excerpt, when Dorothea enters her room, we seem to assume her perspective: we see what she sees – the trees, the sky, the furniture, the books, the fire – and crucially, we seem to follow her gaze in time as well as direction, with the visual objects appearing to us in the order that they do for her. But the final sentence inverts this logic. Suddenly we now see "Dorothea herself" – as if her eyes had passed all the way around the room only to turn impossibly back on her own "figure" – and even more strangely, what we see her doing is precisely *entering the room*, the very action she had to complete in order to have these perceptions in the first place. Here the act of passing through a door thus violates the norms of point of view and linear time at once.

Doors in film, meanwhile, can produce similar perspectival disruptions. In Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, for instance, the narratologist Seymour Chatman notes a violation of point of view that's quite close to what we see in the *Middlemarch* passage. As the protagonist Marcello is visiting his friend Steiner's apartment, the camera first shows us the door opening. In the same shot, Marcello's wife then looks into the camera – thereby telling us, as Chatman notes, "that the shot is subjective ... that we are seeing through his eyes" – and this first-person view continues as Steiner himself greets Marcello. But as Marcello (still within the same shot) turns his eyes to the right, the camera now pans to reveal Marcello himself in the frame: a violation of the first-person perspective previously established. [7] Moreover, this kind of paradox is not unique to the famously experimental Fellini. Indeed, Sianne Ngai notes the same effect in Francis Ford Coppola's thriller *The Conversation*: as the protagonist Harry enters a hotel room where a crime has just occurred, the camera assumes his first-person perspective as it slowly pans around the room, only to reveal Harry himself at the end of the shot. (As Ngai writes, the paradox of this moment is that Harry appears "in a shot designed to represent his *own* gaze.") [8] Even in a medium that is able simply to record people walking through doors like normal, such transitions still occasionally lead to spatial disruptions.

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[5] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 273.

[6] See Wainstein, "Faulkner's Glitches," 93-94.

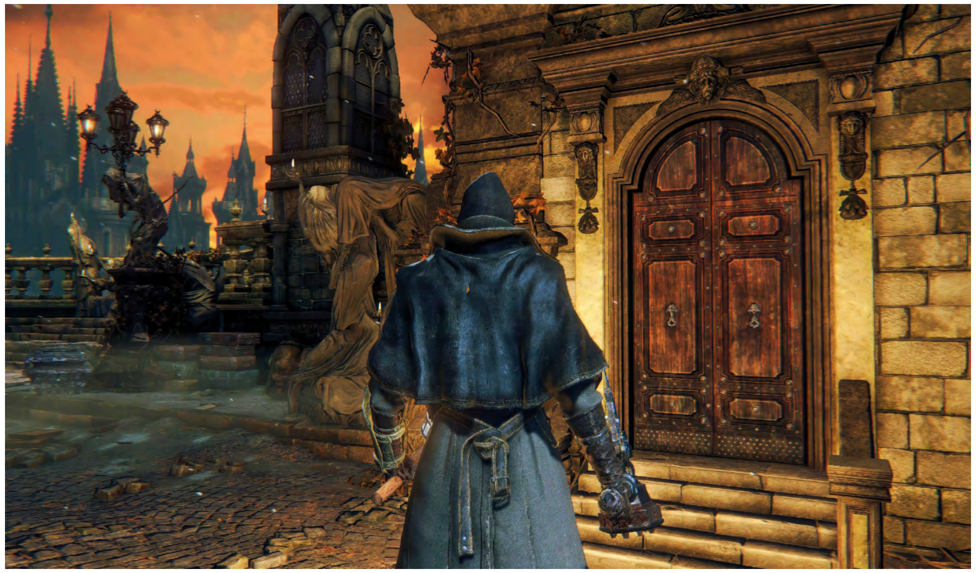
[7] See Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, 161.

[8] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 18-19 (emphasis original).

Given these examples – though admittedly a tiny spread in the grand scheme of things – one may finally wonder if the door as such constitutes a kind of mimetic trouble spot, at least within those mediums that wish to represent not just the instant of passing through a door (as in painting, photography, or even sculpture) but the dynamic process of doing so. Whether because of their deceptively complex spatial organization (a door at once divides and links adjacent spaces), or the unique pressures they place on visual perspective (a door both restricts what we can see and expands our visual range; it conducts us into a new space through a *moving frame* that is necessarily smaller than that space), or their simple status as limit points that are also movable objects in themselves, doors sometimes pose problems for artistic representation. [9]

* * *

The Souls games too have issues with doors, though they're different from what we've seen so far. Most notably, whereas many games dodge the graphical complications of doors by making them swing open both ways, the Souls games lean fully in the opposite direction. When interacting with a door in Souls, one is frequently greeted with the mimetically nonsensical message, "Door does not open from this side," as if within the Souls universe doors were designed only as emergency exits: they may look like doors, but they're essentially escape hatches. To be fair, there's a clear design reason for this gimmick. If in most action games doors function as obstacles to progress, requiring the player to find a key or solve a puzzle to push forward, in Souls games doors function preeminently as sites of return: within the series' mazelike levels, they allow the player to bypass large sections of hostile space after you've successfully traversed them once. Souls doors only open on one side – that is, from inside – because they serve not to move you forward into new areas but rather to get you back more efficiently to where you've already been.



Bloodborne's unfinished door. From the Cathedral Ward side, it's permanently locked. From the Great Bridge side, the game doesn't even recognize it as an interactable object.

In *Bloodborne*, however, this architectural trend – already weird in itself – also suffers a unique distortion. Wandering through Yharnam's Cathedral Ward district, the player will eventually come upon a plaza made up of large semicircular terraces overlooking the Great Bridge – the monumental structure glimpsed in the distance in the opening minutes, and the site of your battle against the game's first boss, the Cleric Beast. Clearly, we are on the verge of one of the series' patented returns, those gratifying backdoor routes to already-explored sections of the gameworld. Except this time the connection doesn't quite happen. Descending a winding stairway to become level with the Great Bridge, you find that the door that should open onto it is permanently locked. More, approaching the door from the Great Bridge reveals that the game doesn't even recognize it as an interactable object from this

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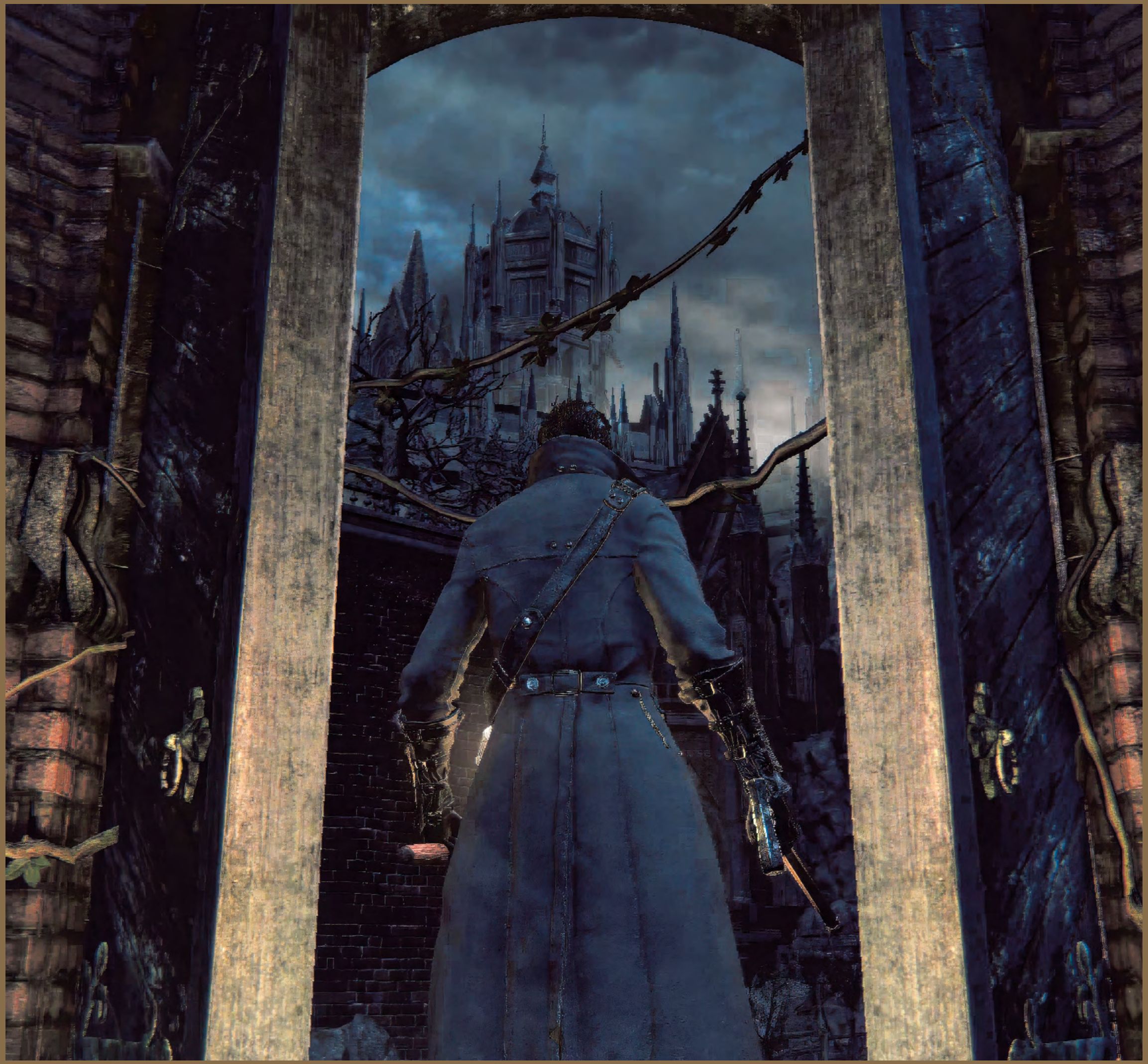
[9] In this sense, they are the opposite of windows, which inherently "aestheticize" space by controlling, framing, and freezing it (by virtue of freezing us: looking out of a window implies standing still). For a suggestive meditation on windows in Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*, see Kurnick, *The Savage Detectives Reread*, 171-73.

IF IN MOST ACTION GAMES DOORS FUNCTION AS OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS, IN SOULS GAMES DOORS FUNCTION PREEMINENTLY AS SITES OF RETURN

direction. Naturally, this ambivalence is more jarring than if the door were simply inert. Whereas Yharnam, like nearly all 3D gameworlds, is full of "painted-on" doors that are immediately recognizable as mere set dressing, this one just feels incomplete, and in accounting for it one can only conclude that the designers either forgot about it or else decided that programming it to open – and thus physically linking two parts of *Bloodborne*'s map – caused problems not worth resolving. Either way, it is unquestionably no more than a development oversight, a lapse wholly devoid of the aesthetic mystery that *Bloodborne*'s other moments of negative form often possess.

As an oversight, however, it is nevertheless emblematic of the series' spatial logic. For if the typical Souls door only opens from one side, this unfinished asset doubles and ironizes that level design trope by only *being a door from one side*. Here partial utility becomes partial existence, in a way that "lays bare" (as Shklovsky would say) the functional equivalence of these two states: even the finished doors in *Souls*, after all, barely qualify as doors. Indeed, in this case the door's very nonfunctionality expresses its lack of any real function. For even if it were fixed, it would serve no gameplay purpose. Situated between two easily accessible areas, it provides neither a combat-avoiding shortcut nor a convenient passage that would save the player a trip back to the teleportation hub of the Hunter's Dream. Its sole use is – or was – to provide the mild satisfaction of linking two areas *in itself*, so that the player might register for an instant the pleasing unity of *Bloodborne*'s gameworld before moving on and forgetting this useless passage entirely. In this sense, the developers were right to treat it as superfluous, since it exists only to objectify spatial connection as such, to refine into an isolated pleasure a level-design trope that elsewhere carries real ludic significance. And even this pleasure is reduced to its barest form. For perhaps the strangest thing about this connection, *qua* connection, that we can already see it before it happens: because the Great Bridge is



The door linking you back to Old Yharnam at the end of Yahar'gul, Unseen Village is impressive and surprising – but also useless. If the player wants to leave, they can just warp from the first lantern rather than going through the trouble of defeating the area's difficult optional boss.

clearly visible a mere 15 feet below the terrace leading to the locked door, one already recognizes and appreciates the spatial link in advance. Unlike other "purely aesthetic" backdoor connections in Souls – such as the giant doors behind Yahar'gul Chapel that lead unexpectedly (and uselessly) back to Old Yharnam, or the pointless elevator leading from the bottom of Elphael, Brace of the Haligtree back to the top in *Elden Ring* – this one lacks even the pleasure of surprise. A formalization of Yharnam's interlinked spatial form, this door itself is also a mere formality, the mechanical certification of a connection that the player has already gotten to enjoy. This is why, in its final broken state, it is perhaps more irritating than anything else, an affront to neatness and polish rather than an actual level-design sin. Instead of the minimal pleasure it was meant to provide, it evokes the minimal *displeasure* of an askew painting or a piece of furniture out of place. And yet, for a certain kind of person – and Souls games seem to attract them – aren't such irritations the very stuff of obsession? [10] (In a 2022 Reddit post about requested changes in a potential *Bloodborne* remake, the third most popular answer reads simply: "Fix that door. You all know the one.") [11] The deceptive "weakness" of the door's structural disruption thus proves emblematic as well. An artistic lapse as commonplace as the object being rendered, this broken door nevertheless retains the power to drive one crazy.

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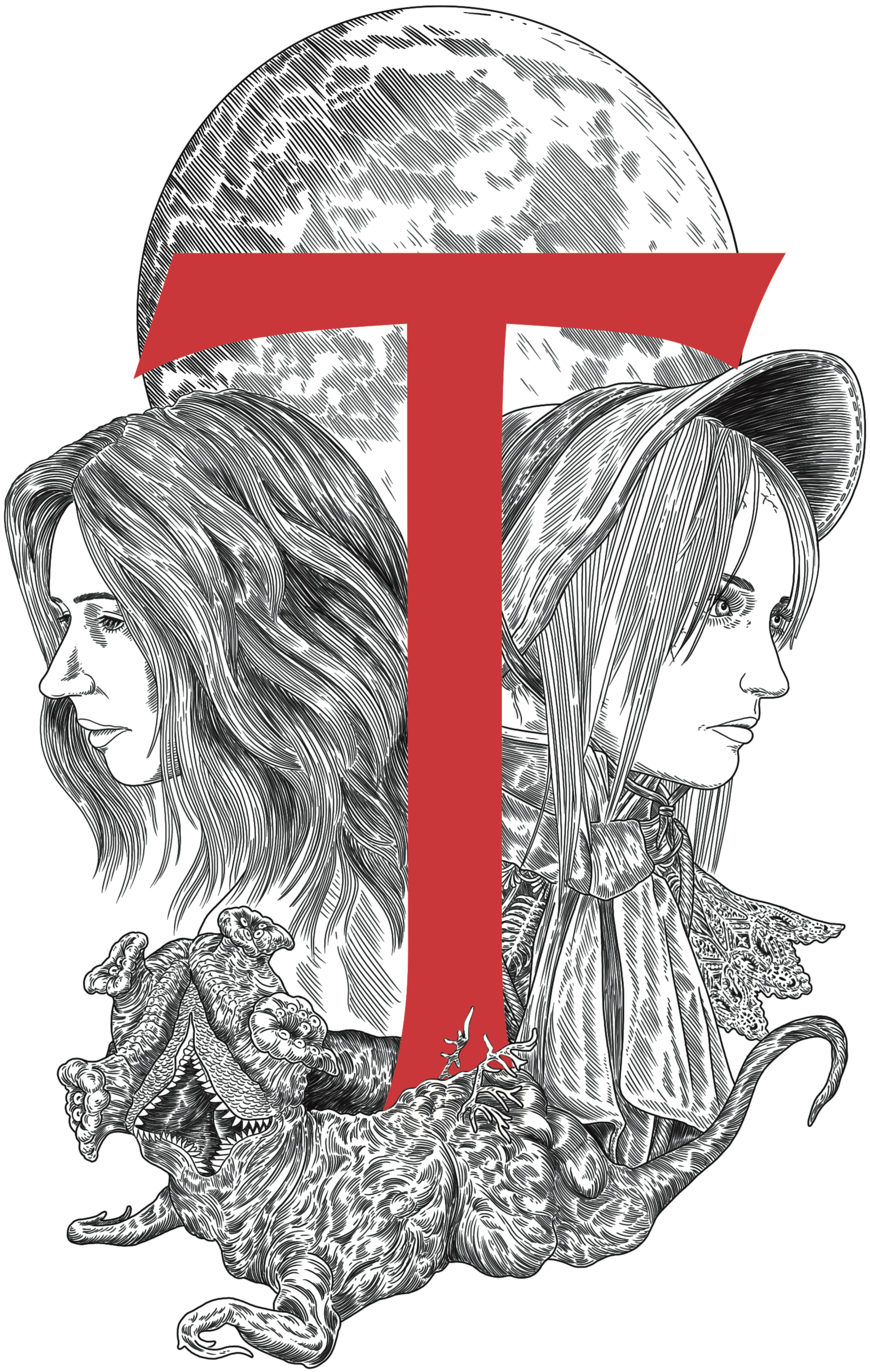
[10] Miller's *Hidden Hitchcock* vividly illustrates the kind of obsession this minor sort of imperfection can evoke. His close analysis of the film *Rope* dilates at length on a bent candlestick visible during one scene: "in the exhilarating perfectionist air of the apartment," Miller writes, "I find this sagging candle a serious enough source of irritation" (56). He then proceeds to hyper-analyze it – brilliantly – for several pages (56-72).

[11] Dizzyeyedalton, comment on "if fromsoftware asked you what you would change in a bloodborne remake for ps5 besides the graphic quality, what would you say?" by nextlevelpaulo, Reddit, March 4, 2022 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/t6id3q/if_fromsoftware_asked_you_what_you_would_change/.

FAIR MAIDENS

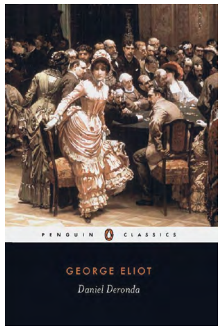
CHAPTER 10

On Reading for the Glitch



CHAPTER 10

There is a famous essay on George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* by the literary critic Cynthia Chase entitled "The Decomposition of the Elephants." An extended close reading in the deconstructionist style, Chase's essay argues that a rambling letter written by a minor character late in the novel lays bare the deceptions of the novel form itself: through this extraneous, seemingly incidental document presented in the text, *Daniel Deronda* subverts its own claims to authority as a "history" and reveals the fantastical, deluded nature of any narrative construction of causal sequence (necessary, of course, to the work of building a fictional plot) whereby A leads to B.



Taken in itself, this argument is typical of the deconstructionist literary criticism popular among academics in the 1970s and '80s, which sought tirelessly to demonstrate how in any linguistic construction (be it a novel, a poem, or a philosophical treatise) the autonomous operations of language inevitably subvert whatever claims about the world the work wishes to make. As with most deconstructionist criticism, however, the appeal of Chase's essay lies not in its arguments, but rather in the subtlety of her close reading, which manages to turn a section that seems almost aggressively superfluous to the main plot of *Daniel Deronda* into the secret key to the entire text. Her essay, that is, derives its "scholarly" power from an aesthetics of surprise: like all close reading, it is primarily a work of art. And perhaps nothing captures this emphasis on surprise more than the essay's brilliant title. Beyond being cleverly self-reflexive – Eliot's 800-page novel is indeed elephantine, and Chase's reading undertakes precisely to decompose it – this title is a provocation to the reader. What does *Daniel Deronda*, a Victorian novel set largely in England and centered on a romance plot, have to do with elephants, let alone decomposing ones? In its grotesqueness and sheer animality, the very phrase "the decomposition of the elephants" seems almost like a violation of *Daniel Deronda* itself, like something dredged out of its unconscious rather than an explicit part of the novel. And yet the phrase, which very few readers of *Daniel Deronda* are likely to remember, does in fact occur, verbatim, in the letter that Chase analyzes. The title of Chase's essay thus encapsulates in miniature a major source of deconstruction's aesthetic power (as well as that of many strands of close reading that came after): the transformation of a textual detail that seems wholly inconsequential, forgettable, and deviant into the work's very center of gravity.

* * *

What would a close reading of *Bloodborne* built on the same aesthetic principle look like? Such a reading, almost certainly, would involve sex and the representation of sexual activity. (We might call it "How to Pick Up Fair Maidens," after the title of a book found incongruously in Gehrman's study.)[1] For perhaps nothing is at once more central to *Bloodborne*'s narrative and yet more dissonant with the work's overall tone, mood, and disposition than – in a word – fucking. To start, let us recall that the Souls games are works in which, outside a few anomalous instances,[2] the gaming medium's pervasive, infantile heterosexual male fantasies find little purchase. It's not just that the normal trappings of an ingrown male sexuality – the exploitative design of female characters, cringy sexual innuendoes, a "romance" system a la *The Witcher 3* or *Mass Effect* – are entirely lacking. The Souls games, one might say, are authentically desexualized, which means that they tend neither to address sexual desire (whether by representing or appealing to it) nor, just as importantly, to repress it, such that the rigorous avoidance of sexual content becomes itself sexually charged. Nearly every character, including your avatar, is a nonsexual being; and yet this nigh-universal celibacy does not mean that sexuality endures – as, say, in a Jane Austen novel or an Arthurian tale – in coded form. Souls has no sexual code. For all its chasteness, the series' attitude toward sex is deviant precisely in its lack of neurosis: what sexual themes do emerge at the margins are treated with disarming explicitness.

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[1] I was first made aware of this through Weesnork's 2015 post, "I found this book in the Hunter's Dream. Now I know why Gehrman never talks to the doll...", Reddit, April 23, 2015 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/33mvgv/i_found_this_book_in_the_hunters_dream_now_i_know/.

[2] Such exceptions would include the overtly eroticized designs of Gwynevere and Chaos Witch Quelaag in *Dark Souls*.

Consider, for instance, the role of the various female "helper" characters who speak kindly to your avatar and perform the crucial task of converting your currency into power-granting "levels" throughout the series: the Maiden in Black, the Doll, the Emerald Herald, the Fire Keepers. Although these idealized women are doubtless fantasies of a kind, the fantasies are not really of the erotic variety: the love these characters are explicitly designed to evoke resembles neither desire nor worship but rather a simple gratitude for the kindness they offer amid misery. At the same time, however, in *Bloodborne* you also receive aid from a prostitute who describes herself as such, and Gehrman suggests in no uncertain terms that as a Hunter of the Dream you are entitled to have sex with the Doll. What needs to be emphasized is that these latter examples do not reveal the truth of the former, as if the series' beautiful helper characters were really coded as prostitutes and sex dolls all along. Once again, the series' asexuality is not a mask for perversion. On the contrary, and far more disconcertingly, asexuality and naked lust exist side by side with equal forthrightness. It is assumed both that the player will understand Gehrman's suggestion perfectly and recoil at the thought. Meanwhile, the very articulation of this "fantasy" violates the representational code of Victorian chastity that the Doll's clothing and manner otherwise broadcast, thus evacuating it of whatever erotic charge it might normally possess. As sexual antitheses, Gehrman and the Doll produce an internal rift within *Bloodborne* akin to what would arise if Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse and the Marquis de Sade's President de Curval existed in the same work.

This relation is paradigmatic. Sex is a site of dissonance in Souls, but it is by no means a secret, and such frankness drains it of its explanatory power. Indeed, there is something curiously impotent about the sex jokes that have, somewhat predictably, become a kind of lingua franca for many Souls players: using the in-game messaging system shared throughout the series, players litter the games' worlds with sexual jibes

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cobbled together from the limited words and phrases that make up the system's predetermined dictionary ("Try thrusting attack ahead," e.g.). Such puerile messages would be offensive were they not strangely inert. For not only does their necessary linguistic awkwardness shift the joke's emphasis from the level of content to that form, but the very effort to "add" sexual content where it doesn't exist fails to transform the work in any way: it neither violates a taboo nor responds to a lack. It doesn't even seem to express a desire. Rather, these messages simply register, with a kind of hysterical insistence, the disturbing knowledge that sex jokes have no power here. They are sheer linguistic effort without payoff, written with the verbal nihilism of those Twitter comics who play precisely on sexual language's incapacity to titillate or offend. (Indeed, even these clumsy attempts at wordplay have already been one-upped by the series' own lexicon, which contains characters called The Penetrator and The Finger Maidens, along with items bearing such names as "Sticky White Stuff" and "Old Hunter's Bone.") Defused from the outset, such jokes read less as a noxious badge of heterosexual male solidarity and more like the compulsive, senseless ravings of those pathetic skeletons in *Dark Souls* who have "gone hollow" and are thus doomed to repeat actions whose purpose they can't even remember. If one laughs at them, the humor derives neither from their transgressive truth nor from their sheer incongruity, but rather from the way their stilted, broken language baldly announces their impotence. The Souls games shrug at sex and sexual commentary alike.

◆

Bloodborne, however, remains a unique case where sex is concerned. For here the series' characteristic deflation of sexual desire nevertheless occurs within a work whose plot ultimately hinges quite explicitly on questions of eldritch sexuality and reproduction. This focus becomes apparent late in the game, when the blood moon appears in the sky after the death of Rom. As we learn from a note in Byrgenwerth University, this moon is a sign of divine fertility: when it rises, the Great Ones descend upon the city to procreate, though with the unhappy knowledge that each of them is destined to "lose its child" and "yearn for a surrogate." [3] This cycle of divine reproduction and premature death forms the subject of the game's final act. First the player takes the role of executioner, slaying the infant Great One, Mergo, at the bidding of the Moon Presence, and thus consummating the fated bereavement of Mergo's parent, the "formless" deity Oedon. [4] This act of deicide, however, also leads indirectly to your becoming a "surrogate" for another god: either the Moon Presence, who now descends from the heavens and embraces you like a child, or – following Redgrave's compelling interpretation – the Doll, who in *Bloodborne*'s secret ending adopts your avatar under her care after you are reborn as a baby Great One. [5]

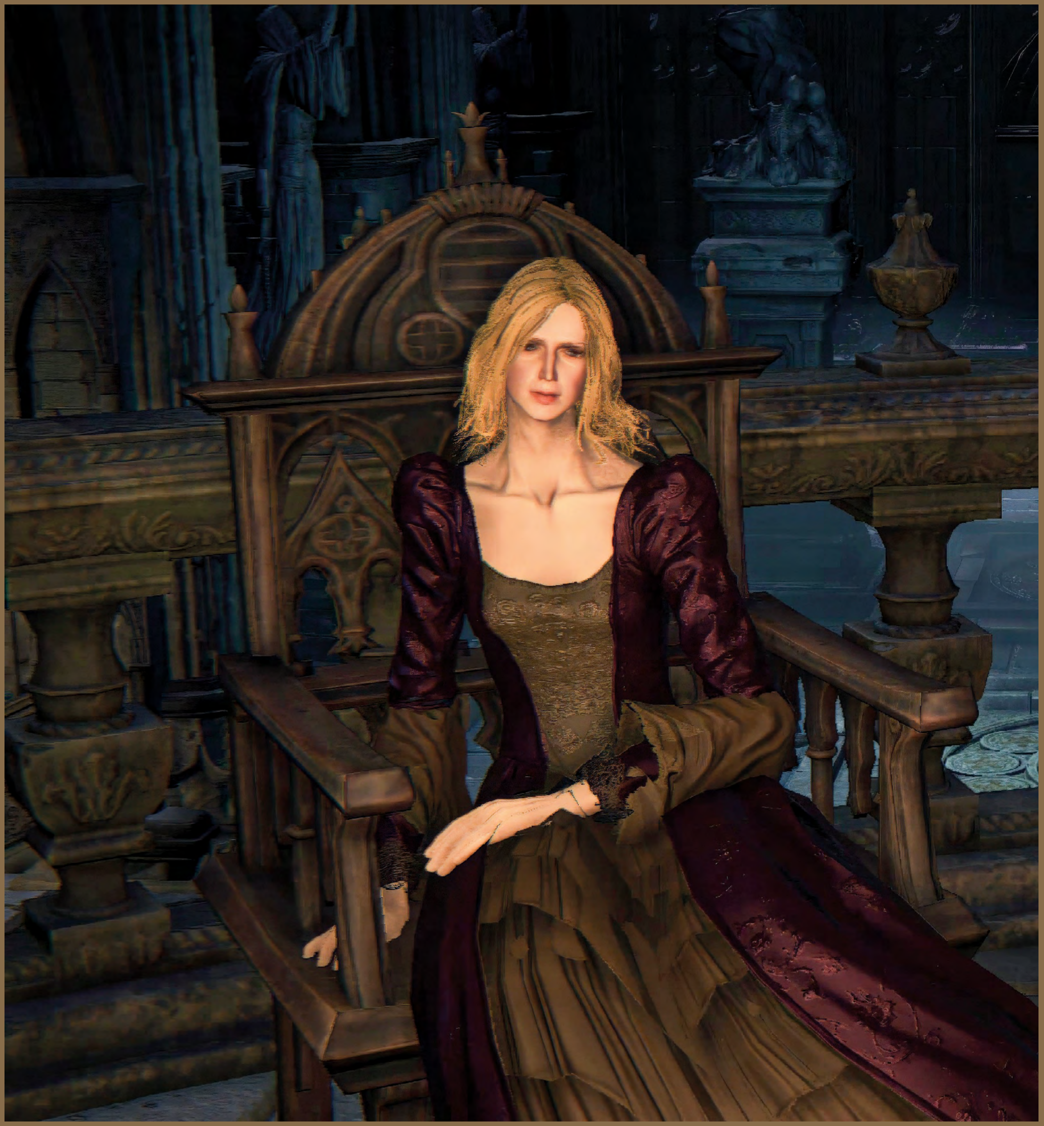
Themes of birth and child loss are thus clearly foregrounded in the game's closing hours. Yet equally important to *Bloodborne*'s final act is the event of conception itself, though information about this process remains highly ambiguous even by Souls standards. During the blood moon phase, the player can discover the sex worker Arianna having just given birth to Oedon's child. [6] In gameplay time, this development is almost instantaneous. Arianna never gives any hint of being pregnant before the blood moon appears. But when the player returns from the Nightmare of Mensis late in the game, she can be found huddled in the basement of Oedon Chapel, stricken with horror at a misshapen,

[3] Item description, One Third of Umbilical Cord. On the Blood Moon and divine fertility, see also Redgrave, *The Paleblood Hunt*, 67-68.

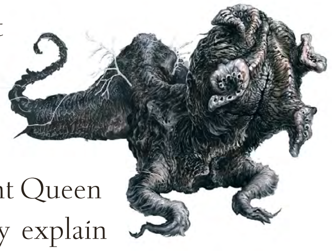
[4] On Mergo's parentage, see Redgrave, *The Paleblood Hunt*, 80.

[5] Ibid., 107.

[6] Redgrave suggests that Arianna is impregnated by Oedon (*The Paleblood Hunt*, 72). The One Third of Umbilical Cord recovered from the corpse of her child also implies this: "Every Great One loses its child, and then yearns for a surrogate, and Oedon, the formless Great One, is no different. To think, it was corrupted blood that began this eldritch liaison."



The sex worker Arianna gives birth to a baby Great One late in *Bloodborne*. Strangely, there is no indication that she's pregnant beforehand – the whole process appears to happen instantaneously.



sluglike creature – a baby Great One – that squirms nearby. On the surface, this optional encounter simply suggests that Oedon has been trying to procreate, and indeed that such efforts at reproduction, beginning with the ancient Queen Yharnam at the dawn of the city's history, may explain the Great Ones' presence in Yharnam in the first place. (The entire story of *Bloodborne*, that is, may occur because the Great Ones need help having children.) Tracing out the implications of this pregnancy, however, reveals a temporal enigma of significant stakes. For we are compelled to ask: when exactly did Arianna have sex with Oedon? On the one hand, it seems to be quite recently, since according to the Byrgenwerth note the blood moon – which, again, has only just risen within the manifest chronology of your playthrough – marks the hour of divine conception: "When the red moon hangs low, the line between man and beast is blurred. And when the Great Ones descend, a womb will be blessed with child." Yet any attempt to date her pregnancy relative to the blood moon founders against the radical instability of this temporal marker. Although the game's action seems first to be divided neatly into three successive temporal phases (evening, night, and blood moon) that unfold over a matter of hours, it's elsewhere implied that the blood moon represents not a new temporal phase but rather the true, underlying state of Yharnam – one that has persisted for quite some time, but remained hidden from human perception due to the magical interference of Rom.[7]

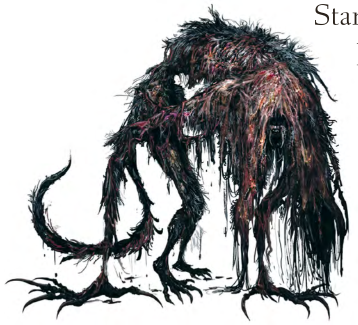
There is thus a core temporal paradox in Bloodborne whereby the single-night timeline that structures the manifest action is also implied to be an illusion masking a different temporal logic. And although

[7] "The Byrgenwerth spider hides all manner of rituals [i.e. the Mensis Ritual that summoned the blood moon], and keeps our lost master from us. A terrible shame. It makes my head shudder uncontrollably" (Note, Oedon Chapel).

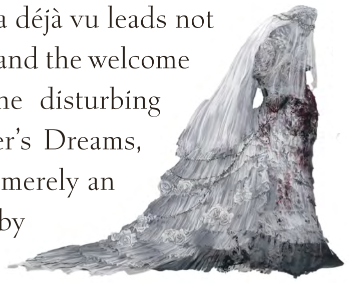
Arianna's childbirth may at first seem to help resolve this ambiguity by imposing a stable interval, that of human pregnancy, upon the game's confusing timeline, it actually intensifies it. There's no evidence, after all, to suggest that eldritch reproduction obeys a normal human timescale. The temporal paradox of this sudden birth thus repeats that of *Bloodborne*'s chronology as a whole. Are we to assume that Oedon, following the recent appearance of the blood moon, has just now "descended" to bless Arianna with child, and hence that eldritch reproduction is nigh-instantaneous and that the single-night timeline remains valid? Or should we infer that she's actually been pregnant for a typical human interval within the concealed reality where the blood moon has loomed over Yharnam for ages? In short, did her liaison with this formless, invisible god happen tonight, in "this" reality, or months ago, in an alternate reality that would force us to revise our assumptions about the game's represented world? Evacuated of desire – and in Oedon's case, even of a body – here the sexual act assumes an ontological significance.

* * *

Yet despite the new prominence of such sexual thematics during the blood moon phase, it's in fact an earlier, secret episode that suggests these ontological stakes most forcefully. This episode occurs in the game's opening hours, after the player has defeated the Blood-Starved Beast in Old Yharnam. Upon returning to the hub at Oedon Chapel, the player discovers a newly unlocked door to a lift that leads to the middle floors of a tower adjacent to the church. To progress in the main quest, one must now traverse the darkened, partially collapsed lower floors of this tower by dropping down a series of wooden platforms and beams until you reach the bottom. During this perilous descent, however, one may also spot an oddly placed door halfway down that can be reached by a pair of difficult jumps. This door leads to a secret area that constitutes *Bloodborne*'s first great twist. Emerging from the gloom of the ruined tower, you find yourself outdoors in a secluded garden by a small chapel. This sudden transition to the open air is jarring enough (how could the tower basement lead here?), but more disorienting still is the realization that you have been here before: the garden and chapel look exactly like the Hunter's Dream.



Or rather – for the order of priority will soon become clear – the Hunter's Dream looks exactly like this place. On an experiential level, the introduction to the Abandoned Old Workshop (as this area is named) thus represents a perversion of one of the signature pleasures of the Souls series' interlocking gameworlds: the moment when you round a corner, open a door, or step from a lift to find yourself suddenly returned to a familiar space. Perhaps the most famous example of this occurs early in *Dark Souls*, when the player descends for hundreds of feet on an elevator inside the Undead Parish cathedral, only to emerge unexpectedly into Firelink Shrine, the friendly hub area at the center of Lordran that is the game's equivalent to the Hunter's Dream. A diabolical counterpart to such bravura displays of spatial continuity, *Bloodborne*'s Abandoned Old Workshop plays on the initial glimmers of recognition that these surprise returns evoke only to pull the rug out from under us. For here the initial wave a déjà vu leads not to the satisfying completion of a mental map and the welcome return to a safe haven, but instead to the disturbing realization that there are in fact two Hunter's Dreams, and that the one we have known thus far is merely an unreal replica of alien origin.[8] As we learn by venturing inside Gehrman's dilapidated



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[8] FromSoftware would go on to repeat this trick – a seeming return to the central hub that turns out to be a replica or double – in *Dark Souls III* and *Elden Ring*.

workshop, the Dream that the player has been using as their base was in fact "conceived" from a bizarre relic – the umbilical cord of an infant Great One – that rests on the altar of the chapel within. In this uncanny, secret space, the spatial disorientation of an unexpected return is thus followed by the even more disorienting awareness that this is in fact not a return, but something much stranger.

Yet amid all this spatial uncanniness, the most unsettling detail of the Abandoned Old Workshop is found not in its physical contents or layout but rather in its soundscape. By standing in a certain part of the garden beside the chapel and cranking up the audio, one can hear a voice issuing very faintly from what seems to be the location of a gnarled tree. Audible at first only as a creepy, spectral muttering, this voice seems ultimately to express the sordid truth of the Hunter's Dream, the Abandoned Old Workshop, and even Yharnam itself: "hmmm, yes," a woman murmurs, "hmmm, yes." The 7-second vocal sample loops perpetually, punctuated each time with a short gasp. It is by far the most explicit representation of sexual activity in all of the Souls games, and one positively jarring in its tonal dissonance. And yet placed thus, amid an intentionally incongruous space whose narrative implications have already turned the player's understanding of *Bloodborne*'s world upside down, it also seems, by its very incongruity, both highly appropriate and charged with meaning. What is the game trying to tell us here?

Like all great formal distortions in art, the potential angles of explanation are myriad. One may think, first, of Gehrman's disturbing suggestion that you are free to "use" the Doll (whose lifeless, real-world original lies inside the abandoned workshop), and of the later revelation that he fashioned this toy himself in the likeness of a student, Maria, for whom he harbored a "curious mania." [9]

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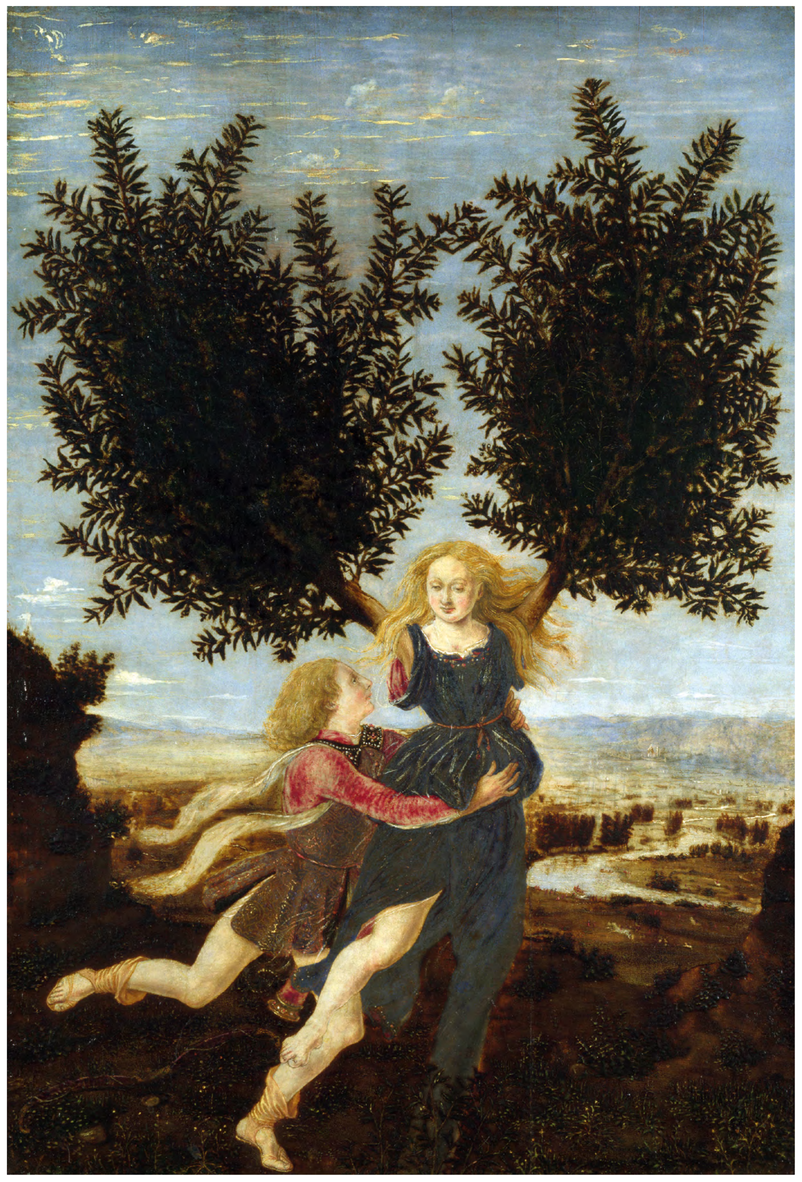
[9] Item description, Maria Hunter Cap.



Apollo and Daphne (c. 1470-1480) by Piero del Pollaiulo. In Ovid's version of the myth, Daphne transforms into a laurel tree to escape from Apollo.

One might therefore conclude, as some players initially did, that the voice is a ghostly imprint of all the perverse activities that have taken place in this sanctuary, an echo all the more disturbing for the pleasure that the Doll seems to take in her conscripted function. ("I do love you," she will later tell the protagonist in the Hunter's Dream, "isn't that how you've made me?") Moreover, as in Ovid, here the most monstrous sexual acts seem to be a catalyst for ontological transformation: the fact that the voice seems to emanate from a tree reminds one of all the women in the Metamorphoses whose experience of sexual violence transfigures them into flora. [10] Meanwhile, the suggestion that the Hunter's Dream was itself "conceived" from something that happened in the Old Abandoned Workshop may also imply transformation of a more cosmic variety. Could the Dream's alien simulacrum of Gehrman's workshop, home of the Moon Presence (Paleblood) and thus the physical crux of *Bloodborne*'s plot, itself be the "offspring" of Gehrman's illicit liaison with an enchanted doll? Such a reading would reveal the story of Bloodborne to be founded upon Gehrman's act of fucking a toy.

At the same time, we also know that Oedon, whose cathedral lies nearby, sometimes visits Yharnam to impregnate human women. Could this audio loop then be the sound of one such divine visitation? Is the murmuring woman meant to set up the mysterious pregnancy that later occurs? And could Oedeon's presence thus explain the woman's curious invisibility? This god's defining feature, after all, is precisely his formlessness; and based on our brief encounter with Mergo, who appears to the player within the Nightmare of Mensis only as an empty baby carriage, it would seem that his offspring likewise lack a physical form. We might therefore speculate that Oedon is now sheltering his sexual partner in his own immateriality, just as Poseidon, in his liaison with the sea nymph Tyro, concealed the act beneath a wave. [11] Meanwhile, the puzzling fact that this sexual encounter is happening before the procreative phase of the blood moon might actually be an argument in this reading's favor. For a hidden voice emanating from the blood moon reality is already one of the game's explicit devices. This second aural secret, moreover, is likewise linked to Oedon's reproductive efforts: during the blood moon, the player can sometimes hear the faint cry of his child Mergo issuing across dimensions.

The dense, winding alleys of the Cathedral Ward's lower section.
It's possible that the vocal sample in the Abandoned Old Workshop
was originally meant to be placed somewhere down here.

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[10] Anahid Nersessian writes about the prominence of rape in Ovid's poem: "The *Metamorphoses* is an epic poem organized around a single subject – change – and it takes shape over a long series of two hundred and fifty or so stories in which a being is transformed into another kind of being. It is striking, and utterly unavoidable, how many of these stories turn on chase scenes ... in which a maiden loth is pursued by a determined man ... All of these chases end, eventually, with the maiden and sometimes the man undergoing a change of form" (*Keats's Odes: A Lover's Discourse*, 17).

[11] Ezra Pound describes this scene in Canto II of the *Cantos*:

> And by the beach-run, Tyro,
> Twisted arms of the sea-god,
> Lithe sinews of water, gripping her, cross-hold,
> And the blue-gray glass of the wave tents them,
> Glare azure of water, cold-welter, close cover.

However, if one accumulates enough Insight (a gameplay stat that reveals hidden eldritch phenomena in the gameworld), Mergo's crying becomes audible much earlier, during the evening and night phases, which again implies that the blood moon state exists somewhere beyond the initial reality that's presented to the player, and furthermore that Oedon forms the game's primary hinge between these superimposed planes of existence. From this angle, then, the woman's strange invisibility comes to seem extraordinarily apt. Doesn't the Healing Church already teach us that we must renounce vision to access the eldritch truth? And haven't we already been shown that there's an entire world hiding in plain sight behind the one we know? In a game full of "wrong" moments, it's hard to think of one that feels more right. [12]

* * *

Nevertheless, I now want to step back from our provisional reading and return to the methodological questions with which we began. So far I've been sketching out an interpretation that would assert the hidden importance of sex – not the abstract processes of reproduction, but actual, physical intercourse – to *Bloodborne's* design. Like many close readings, such an analysis begins with an issue that seems wholly marginal (if not antithetical) to the work, and then labors to move it to the center of the work's significance. And similarly, like many readings, this analysis ultimately turns on a hidden instance of negative form that seems, due to a striking confluence of thematic and formal enigmas, almost infinitely suggestive. Indeed, if I had to nominate one moment in *Bloodborne* as the formal crux of the entire work – the jarring, uncanny rupture that, were we only able explain it, might illuminate the meaning of the whole – I would choose this voice, whose strange fittingness in its very inexplicability makes it the ideal object of interpretation, the very archetype of those fleeting disruptions for which close reading has always had its own "curious mania."

And yet, at this point our reading must break off. For scholars of *Bloodborne* will already know that we have been circling around an absent center. This provocative, deviant, ghostly voice, this infamous secret within a secret, is in truth nothing other than a glitch – an accidental development error stemming from a haphazard revision during the digital construction of Yharnam. As Reddit user Thestingwray explains, this vocal loop was originally supposed to be linked to a house located somewhere in the winding Cathedral Ward alleys that lie directly below the Abandoned Old Workshop, at the foot of the nearby tower. [13] (Certain buildings in *Bloodborne* have continuous audio loops – laughing, coughing, screaming – that represent their interior activity. That this sample was intended to be one such loop is supported by the fact that it actually falls silent if the player returns to the area during the blood moon, exactly like all of the other ambient sound effects linked to buildings in Yharnam.) At some point in development, however, this loop was removed, but instead of being deleted it was relocated to a point high in the sky, which caused it to "clip" through the floor of the level geometry above and to become audible within the Abandoned Old Workshop.

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[12] I again want to flag again my indebtedness to Miller's *Hidden Hitchcock* here. Through a series of brilliant close readings, Miller reflects at length on the way in which "wrong" moments in art – even including actual mistakes, which this sound effect in *Bloodborne* will turn out to be – both fascinate the critic and often lend themselves quite readily to interpretive readings that justify their presence by relating them to the work's own themes.

[13] Thestingwray writes: "The sound is just a developer mistake. It was supposed to be heard in the alleyways on Cathedral Ward, instead of removing it the developers just put it really high in the sky, but this ended up clipping into the Abandoned Workshop map. | Tldr: 90% of 'lore' is just a glitch or a developer error." Thestingwray, comment on "So, about *those noises* in the Old Abandoned Workshop" by Faunstein, Reddit, August 3, 2021 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/ox2djd/so_about_those_noises_in_the_old_abandoned/.

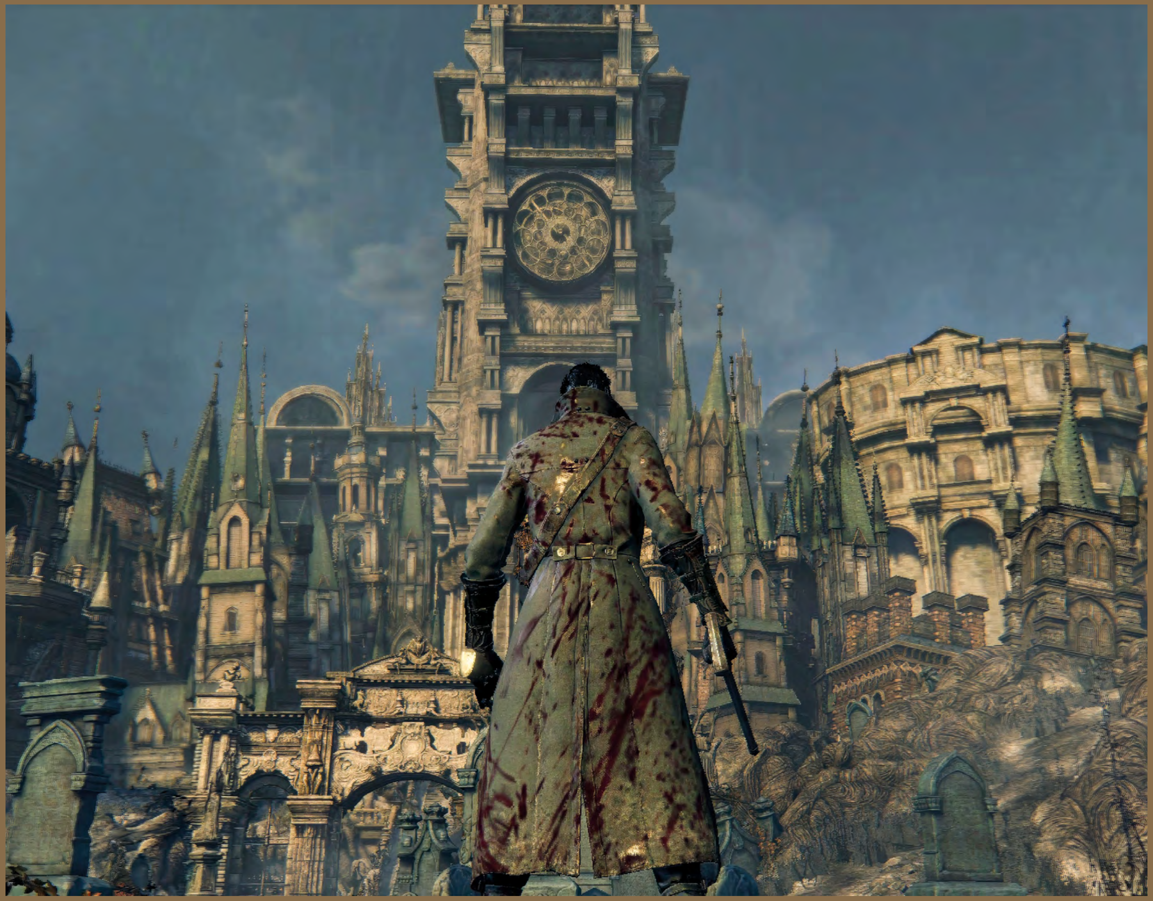
> THIS PROVOCATIVE, DEVIANT, GHOSTLY VOICE, THIS INFAMOUS SECRET WITHIN A SECRET, IS IN TRUTH NOTHING OTHER THAN A GLITCH

This technical explanation would seem to call off the whole game of close reading, both for the interpretively voracious Souls community (for whom this revelation was indeed a dose of cold water) and for our own more specialized attempts at meaning-making. For glitches, as I suggested earlier, have a curious way of resisting interpretation even as they compel it. This is due largely to their inherent accidentalness. For all their suggestiveness as interpretive objects – and the Abandoned Old Workshop glitch is exemplary in this respect – this accidentalness makes them unusually hard to construe as anything other than mere artistic faults. Recall that a basic rule of close reading dictates that the moment of negative form must always turn out to be a secret artistic triumph. (In "The Decomposition of the Elephants," for example, Chase asserts that a seemingly contrived plot development in *Daniel Deronda* – one of several negative features she analyzes – is "not a violation of genre conventions or vraisemblance [realism] but a deconstruction of the concept of cause," which is to say, a mark of the novel's extraordinary philosophical power.) [14] Yet it is precisely this reversal that glitches render moot. For how is a close reader to find meaning in a phenomenon that by definition implies the negation of meaning through pure randomness? Glitches are definitively – because literally – bugs, not features. This now-ubiquitous phrase may define close reading's approach to negative form, but only as a metaphor: when faced with an actual bug the

[14] See Cynthia Chase, "The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double-Reading *Daniel Deronda*," 217. Chase also makes a similar point on the same page about *Daniel Deronda's* organization of time. Although some readers "have judged that [the novel] fails adequately to render the sense of duration and the form of time that would make the action of the novel plausible and significant," Chase argues that the letter her essay is analyzing "identifies such objections as symptoms of a banal conception of novelistic time," and suggests that *Daniel Deronda's* plot in fact constitutes "a systematic disruption of narrative principles and temporal structures." For a deconstructionist critic, such a "disruption" is unambiguously a good thing.

formula breaks down. Unlike other kinds of negative form, to identify a disruption as a glitch is thus precisely to empty it of the artistic ambiguity – is it a bug or a feature, a simple mistake or something more? – upon which close reading thrives. It would be like calling an enigmatic temporal contradiction in a novel a "random, meaningless accident": in doing so one practically forecloses any kind of redemptive interpretation. The raw contingency of glitches therefore tends to make them unreadable from any critical perspective beyond that of pure technical assessment. They are a kind of mistake, but unlike the slips and symptoms beloved of Freudian interpretation, they do not occur "accidentally on purpose," in a way that would allow critics to read a secret necessity in the outwardly unintentional. [15] Glitches are just mistakes, full stop. For this reason, they tend to be artistically redeemable only as happy accidents, like the shape of a face on a piece of toast. However remarkable such a likeness may be, the prospect of close reading it seems absurd – not for any naïve assumptions about art and authorship, as some strands of postmodern theory might have it, but rather because, deep down, close reading is only interested in intentional structures. It is a method that presupposes the inherent purposiveness of a created thing. Whether it be an artwork, a game, a custom, a remark, or an advertisement, one can only close read what is made, and glitches, as a category of accident, can't be made – they can only happen. [16]

Though an undeniable spur to close reading, the Abandoned Old Workshop glitch thus also represents a certain limit to the practice. Like *Bloodborne's* own eldritch simulacra, it presents the outward guise of



The clock tower in the Hunter's Nightmare literalizes the paradoxical notion of "sky burial." From its summit, everything below the clock face appears to be embedded in the ground (as seen on the next page).

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[15] McAlpine gives a rich account of how the Freudian idea of unconscious intention has influenced literary critics' approach to mistakes in *The Poet's Mistake*. See especially 20–21.

[16] McAlpine notes this distinction: "Unlike accidents, which can merely happen, mistakes are made – they are born of choice" (17-18).

a thing – in this case, an exemplary object of close readerly desire – while violating our normal ways of understanding and relating to it. This is one reason why I find it so interesting. Yet this reflection of *Bloodborne's* own narrative thematics also indicates one last feature of the glitch that grants it a strange structural felicity – not in spite of, but rather because of, its glitchiness. For perhaps the most extraordinary thing about this glitch, in stark contrast to the vast majority of glitches in video games, is that it remains weirdly appropriate even when recognized as one. If it's nothing more than a happy accident, it is thus the happiest of accidents. This is due not simply to its thematic resonances, though we have seen that it possesses these in spades. More crucially (and unusually), the glitch harmonizes with *Bloodborne's* internal structure in its very guise as a technical error. After all, the mistake that seems to have produced it – the relocation of a defunct audio loop to the "sky" that causes it to impinge upon a different part of Yharnam – itself testifies to the amazing vertical continuity of *Bloodborne's* world, and thus makes the glitch a perverse emblem of Souls level design as a whole. Furthermore, in confusing the illusory sky for a real one, this error reenacts precisely the confusion of sky and ground that the Souls games repeatedly dramatize within their gameworlds. From the Earthen Peak to Ash Lake to *Bloodborne's* vertically stacked Nightmare realms (each of which possesses its own false sky), the series insistently stages the surreal moment in which what first appears to be endless sky turns out to be the solid floor of another area, or vice versa. Indeed, *Bloodborne* names this confusion explicitly in the notion of "sky burial," the mysterious custom of Hunters of Hunters such as Eileen the Crow.[17] We might say it was precisely a sky burial that the unknown designer sought to perform by hiding the audio loop above its original location – an interment that, like so many last rites in the Souls world, led only to an uncanny resurrection. Not just the glitch itself but the very error that created it thus recapitulates *Bloodborne's* internal dynamics. Is it any surprise, then, that all of this happens in the vicinity of Oedon Chapel, shrine to the formless deity who defies spatial and temporal coherence alike? *Bloodborne's* relentless paradoxicality draws even random mistakes into its rigorous structural logic. Here error itself becomes expressive, energizing, harmonious; and in the end, even the frustrated close reader may marvel at the fact that the game's most suggestive deviation – which is to say its most blatant artistic lapse – occurs under the auspices of the god of negative form.

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[17] As the item description for the Crowfeather Garb informs us: "Hunters of Hunters dress as crows to suggest sky burial. | The first Hunter of Hunters came from a foreign land, and gave the dead a virtuous native funeral ritual, rather than impose a blasphemous Yharnam burial service upon them, with the hope that former compatriots might be returned to the skies, and find rest in a hunter's dream."

CHAPTER 11

On Flatness

SHALLOW WATER

CHAPTER II

Perhaps nothing is more redolent of the distinctive Souls atmosphere than the *tap tap tap tap* of your avatar’s lonely footsteps echoing in the sonic void where, were this any other action game, canned ambient music should be playing. This sound is emblematic precisely because it’s so unusual: the Souls games dare to be silent, to let the windy desolation of their ruined landscapes speak for itself, and this aural restraint in turn underscores the fact that in these under-scored games your primary activity is not fighting but *walking*.

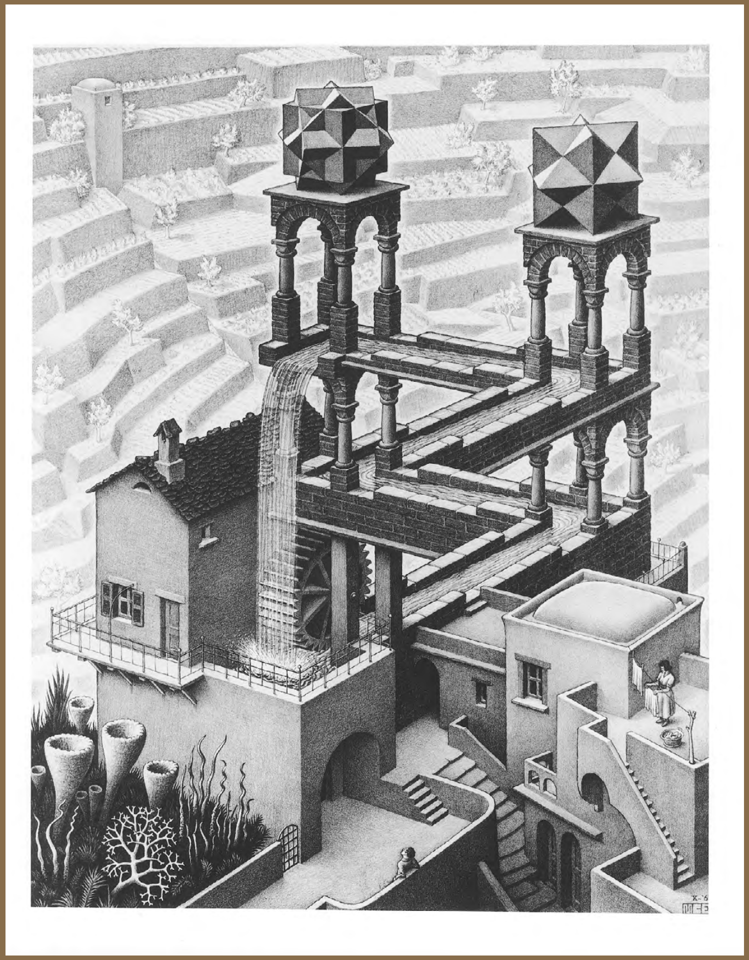
That your avatar walks – rather than jumps, climbs, or slides – is indeed an important distinction, one that indicates not just the deliberate pace of these games but also the particular nature of the spaces they present for your solitary traversal. [1] For all their much-lauded "verticality" – their way of arranging rooms, dungeons, cities, and entire biomes in intricate spirals and stacks rather than dispersing them evenly along the horizontal axis as in most open-world games – Souls environments are preeminently flat at the scale of the individual step. Such planar regularity is, of course, an enduring convention of exploration-based video games, whose emphasis on seamless movement causes them to abhor tripping or stumbling (in this sense Kojima's *Death Stranding* is a radical outlier), and whose archetypal unit of traversable ground remains the rigorously level "platform" from which the medium's founding genre draws its name. Yet Souls games, and *Bloodborne* especially, make this flatness unusually noticeable, both because in them it is largely unbroken by the customary ledges to vault and chasms to leap, and because, at certain points, they elevate unnatural flatness itself into its own kind of atmospheric device.

How else to explain the series' recurring environmental motif of enormous shallow pools? Indeed, if nothing captures the "Souls vibe" like the sound of your avatar's echoing footsteps, perhaps nothing calls to mind the *peculiarity* of the spaces the Souls games represent than the *splosh splosh splosh* of those footsteps trudging through ankle-deep water that stretches for hundreds of feet. Although Miyazaki has sometimes been mocked for what fans good-naturedly call his "swamp fetish" – his insistence on adding into each Souls game at least one area in which the ground is covered in life-sapping poison mire – such swamps and bogs, which provide a "natural" justification for all that shallow water, are significantly less weird than the atrium-sized kiddie pools that appear just as often. These shallow bodies make a spectacle of the series' signature environmental flatness by doubling it. Whereas the lake or pond already stands as a natural paradigm of pure, extended Flatness, the vast shallow pools in the Souls games eerily mirror that flatness in the ground beneath the water's surface, thus rendering it wholly unnatural. At best, they are reminiscent of an incursion of water to where it shouldn't be – an image of the calm aftermath of natural disaster – while at worst, they represent a perversion of Nature itself, a vision of aquatic immensity that alienates precisely through its uncanny openness to human habitation, to walking. Though the reader's particular phobias and associations will vary, one could argue that the only thing more disturbing than the idea of floating alone in the middle of a vast ocean is the thought of *standing there.* [2]

Doubtless, there are likely mechanical factors at play in this trope. Unlike in other adventure games (including FromSoftware's own *Sekiro*), your avatar cannot swim, and thus it follows that the only water they can traverse will be water they can walk in. When we add to this equation the weird flatness of Souls environments in general, then the massive shallow pools start to make more sense: these bodies simply radicalize that flatness by covering it in a thin layer of a medium that can

[1] *Elden Ring*, of course, adds a dedicated jump button – one of several changes to the core gameplay formula that distinguishes it fundamentally from prior Souls games.

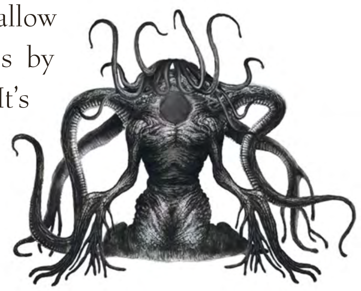
[2] This literally happens to the narrator of Lovecraft's short story "Dagon." Set adrift at sea on a small boat after his vessel is attacked by a German ship during WW1, the narrator falls asleep amid "the heaving vastness of unbroken blue." Yet when he awakes, this blue vastness has transformed – terrifyingly – into a flat, sticky mire extending as far as the eye can see. As he attests, "There was nothing within hearing, and nothing in sight save a vast reach of black slime; yet the very completeness of the stillness and the homogeneity of the landscape oppressed me with a nauseating fear" (*The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, 1-2).

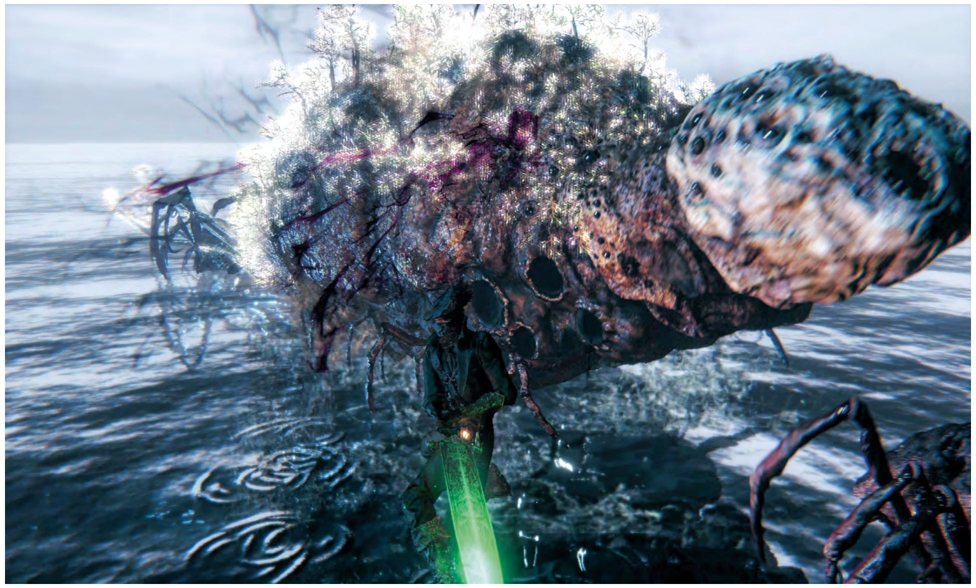


Waterfall (1961) by M. C. Escher. Escher's impossible spaces – which have been brilliantly reimagined as spatial puzzles in games like *Final Fantasy VII* and *God of War 3* – generate paradoxical configurations of flatness and depth similar to what we find in *Bloodborne*. In Escher's case, however, it is the flatness of the image itself, rather than the represented space therein, that subverts the illusion of realistic three-dimensionality.

never be anything but level. Yet rather than justifying the trope, this mechanical perspective only highlights the fact that such pools lack any gameplay function whatsoever. They neither damage your health (like poison mire or lava) nor impede your movement (like the Souls games' occasional stretches of waist-deep water: an entirely different ontological category), but rather provide a purely visual and aural "skin" atop the series' elementary environmental building-block of flat, walkable ground. They are, in other words, a purely aesthetic element of level design. Although their failure to resemble a more realistic body of water can be explained mechanically – the Souls topography is by definition walkable – the more basic presence of water itself can only be explained on mimetic grounds, as a choice about the kind of space the game wishes to depict.

And *Bloodborne* makes clear that such spaces are essentially uncanny. For tellingly, it is in the player's first, climactic encounter with an eldritch being – the battle with Rom, the Vacuous Spider – that one finds the series' purest version of this trope. Leaping from Master Willem's balcony into the depths of Byrgenwerth Lake, you pass through the water's dark surface and fall for hundreds of feet, only to land safely within a brilliantly lit expanse of ankle-deep water stretching to infinity in every direction. The moment is telling not just because this surprising environmental transition literalizes, in your avatar's fall, precisely the mimetic distortion that the trope as a whole represents – the disorienting substitution of a vast shallowness for realistic aquatic depth. On a more basic level, this shallow expanse reveals the trope's intrinsic weirdness by functioning here as the very sign of the Alien. It's as if Rom's Moonside Lake, and all its eldritch associations, were already lurking in all the more "realistic" instances of this trope as their secret, ideal form.





The eldritch being Rom, the Vacuous Spider resides within an infinite expanse of ankle-deep water.

Later events in *Bloodborne* only strengthen this link between shallow water and eldritch surreality. Indeed, the final location you visit, the Fishing Hamlet within the dreamworld of the Hunter's Nightmare, presents nothing less than an entire ocean without depth. Granted, the game doesn't say explicitly that this ocean is depthless, and in fact, when first stepping onto the shore upon your arrival, exploring the shallows on either side of the main road to the town quickly reveals sheer underwater cliffs that drop off to fathomless depths, preventing further traversal (perhaps the best evidence yet that in areas where water is present, the Souls universe abhors an incline). But the environmental design of this area's most important location, the boss arena simply called Coast, tells a different story. A site of trauma and tragedy, where the Healing Church's slaughter of a beached Great One caused Yharnam to inherit the "bottomless curse" of "a bottomless sea" (as the Fishing Hamlet Priest tells us), the Coast is another area in *Bloodborne* in which the player confronts an eldritch being within an expanse of shallow water.[3] And although here the physical setting is less outwardly surreal than that of the Moonside Lake, this Coast's shallows seem similarly endless. For trekking horizonward through the ocean water, one's progress is finally blocked not by an underwater cliff – the solution to the problem of representing aquatic depth that the game introduced just a short while ago – but rather, as in the Moonside Lake, by the classic game-design contrivance of an invisible wall. In their very arbitrariness, such boundaries often suggest a lack of any discernible topographic change in the environment that lies beyond them. They are, in other words, frequently a sign of absolute environmental uniformity. Insofar as their utility consists in providing a necessary restriction of gameplay space when other more "natural" environmental obstacles – cliffs, trees, buildings – are deemed mimetically inappropriate, the eschewal of an underwater cliff here thus seems like a significant artistic choice: these shallows, the invisible wall implies, may be thought to continue indefinitely.

And is this not, in the end, the more spatially coherent reading of the region's coastal topography anyway? After all, we already know that this entire seascape rests directly atop a nightmare-world version of Yharnam: in one of the game's trippier spatial transitions, the player enters the Fishing Hamlet's sea-level terrain from the summit of a cathedral clock tower rising from the city below. If we want to maintain some kind of spatial consistency between these two vertically adjacent realms, what looks here like the surface of a deep sea is thus perhaps really akin to a level "floor" whose reverse side would be the empyrean "roof" of the Hunter's Nightmare beneath. The stacking of these two realms, in other words, is the very epitome of the Souls games' signature collision of verticality and flatness; and nothing is more indicative of water's paradoxically paradigmatic relation to that flatness than the idea of an ocean that is really a ceiling. A "bottomless sea"? The player knows better.

[3] The battle against Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos also takes place in shallow water.

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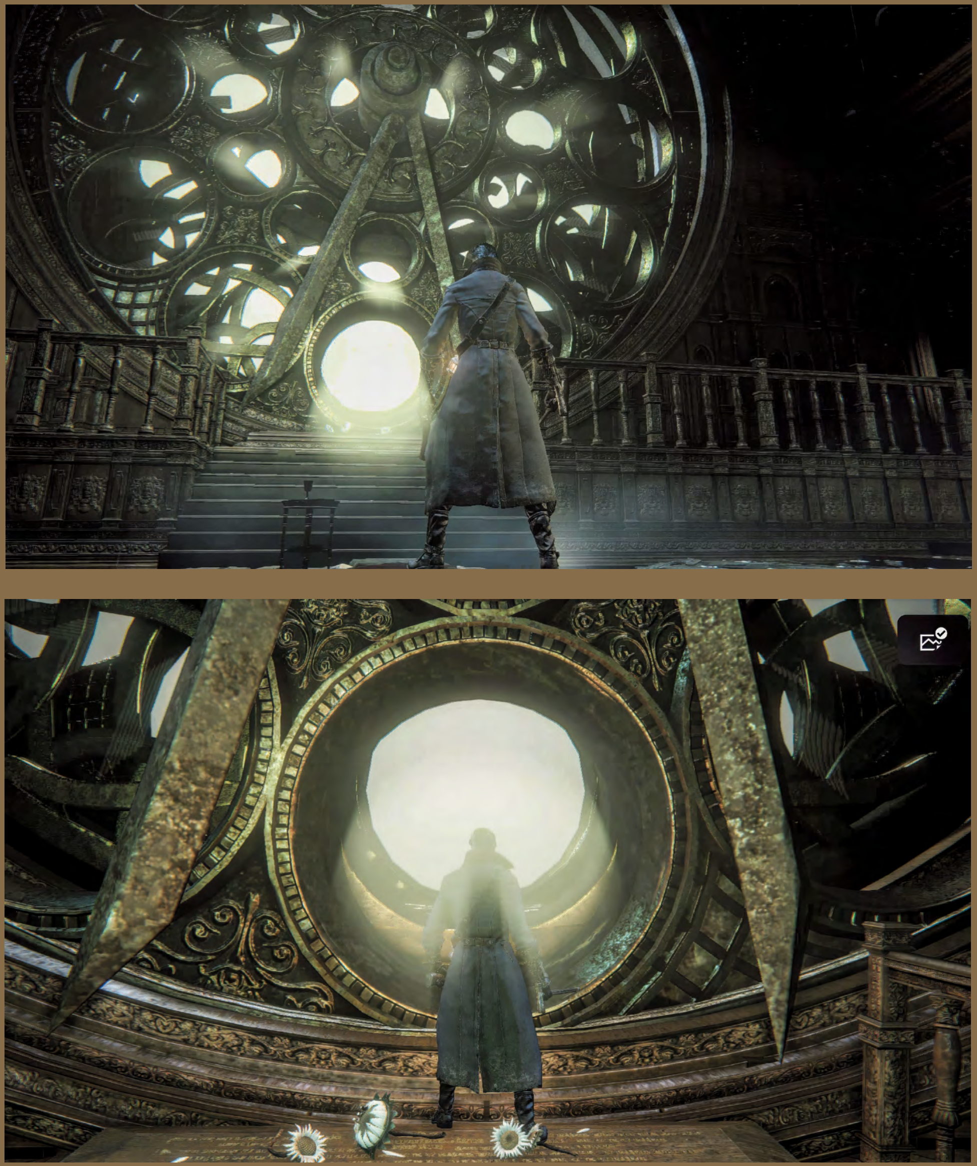
Yet *Bloodborne*'s most complex engagement with this environmental motif in fact occurs within a space, the basement realm of the Nightmare of Mensis, in which no actual water seems to be present. Rather, as in the Abyss of *Dark Souls* to which this area makes obvious reference, venturing into the shadow world beneath the Mensis School's secret fortress sees your avatar walking on a typically flat – and yet atypically *invisible* – floor suspended in an endless pitch-black void. Descending via lift from the castle atrium, you are deposited within what at first seems to be a place of pure nothingness, vacant not only of light but also of any object, structure, or entity against which to orient yourself spatially. Of course, this impression of emptiness is immediately troubled by the fact that your avatar, instead of drifting, floating, or falling yet further, continues to walk around completely as usual, as if to provide final testament to the fact that at the absolute negative limit of Souls existence, when all other entities and experiences in the universe have been stripped away, walking on a flat surface will remain: *ambulo ergo sum.* And sure enough, one's suspicion that this void is not quite as formless or empty as it would seem is confirmed upon taking a few steps further into the dark, where the silhouette of a massive body soon becomes discernible. You are not alone in here. Some hundred yards from the spot where you touched down rests the fallen form of the Mensis Brain – a misshapen, squishy, tentacled mass, the botched result of the Mensis School's attempt to produce their own Great One, whom you recently sent plummeting into these depths during your ascent to the castle's summit.

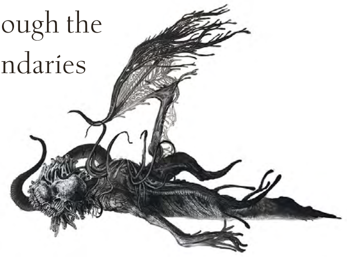
Thorough players of *Bloodborne* will know that this now-harmless being, who simply stares at you dumbly as if begging to be put out of its misery, harbors one of the game's coolest secrets: performing the "Make Contact" gesture in front of it will provoke a silent, telepathic response – the game's sole instance of human-to-eldritch communication – that



After summiting the massive clocktower in the Hunter's Nightmare, the player steps through the clock face and finds themselves, of all places, on a beach.

grants your character a helpful item. Yet perhaps the most striking detail about this entity is not its hidden gameplay functionality but rather its simple spatial orientation. For if the Brain's prostrate form, flaccid and splayed out like an octopus plopped onto a laboratory floor, reiterates that there is indeed some kind of flat "ground" to this abyss (however transparent or immaterial), its bulging underside nevertheless *extends slightly below* the level of the invisible surface on which your character stands, thus simultaneously upholding and violating the Souls norm of environmental flatness. However incidental this minor spatial paradox may seem, it constitutes a somewhat puzzling artistic choice. For given that the level designers have already made the odd decision to furnish this formless void with a "floor" to walk upon, one wonders why they don't commit to it. Why render the Brain as sinking ever so slightly beneath this floor when it would seemingly have been just as easy, and more spatially consistent, to have it rest on top of it? The only mimetically sensible conclusion I can imagine is that however perfectly flat this invisible ground is, it is not perfectly *hard.* Although your character jogs comfortably across it without making the slightest impression, the fall of this massive blob from such a great height seems to have recessed its underside within a shallow crater about two or three feet deep, while its lighter appendages continue to lie, "realistically" as it were, upon the same flat plane as your character.

And yet even this explanation – which produces a new paradox by now conceiving of the invisible floor not as the abstract idea of an infinite flat surface but rather as a solidly material *substance* with its own physical properties – runs into a problem. For although the Brain's arms and tentacles largely respect the boundaries of this solid plane, they do not do so entirely. Watch them closely, and it appears that the tip of one tentacle, in regular curling movements synced to the pulsations of the Brain's core, occasionally passes below your own ground level without meeting the slightest physical resistance, as if it were absently fingering not an invisible surface of rock, mud, or sand but rather of *water.* And indeed, with each curl of the tentacle, one can hear a faint squishing and sploshing – an audio loop that, though emanating from the Brain's center rather than from the appendage in question, nevertheless strengthens the impression that something wet is nearby. What reads for your character as hard, level ground thus reads for the Brain's arms as the surface of a pool, as if these two paradigms of flatness were so interchangeable within the architectonics of Souls level design that they could not only be substituted for each other at any point but indeed might coexist at *the same point*, within the experience of a single, chemically unstable surface that oscillates between these opposed material states depending on which object or entity encounters it. This mimetic contradiction, in other words, lays bare both the structural identity of shallow water and level ground as environmental components and the fundamental experiential dissonance of that identity. A living embodiment of the player's disjunctive spatial experience, the Mensis Brain plummets to the endless floor of a bottomless pit, extends (but not deeply!) through that floor's unbreakable plane, and at the deepest point in *Bloodborne*'s world reveals that world's essential depthlessness in the very act of scratching – which is also to say splashing – below its surface.



MEMORY ALTAR

CHAPTER 12

On Writing and Forgetfulness

CHAPTER 12

Anyone harboring doubts as to *Bloodborne*'s capacity to bear this kind of extended analysis should consider how much has been written about a novel like *Dracula*. Let me be blunt: taken purely on their aesthetic achievements, *Bloodborne* is undoubtedly the superior work.

BRAM STOKER

DRACULA
BRAM STOKER

For all of *Dracula*'s enormous value as a historical document – a "vertical slice" (in game industry terms) of late-Victorian culture that presents the period's imperial anxieties, economic obsessions, and sexual neuroses with hallucinatory intensity – Bram Stoker's "masterpiece" is frankly awful as a novel. *Dracula*'s earliest critics were well aware of this. Upon its publication in 1897, initial reviews regarded it (in the words of one recent critic) as a "cynical pot-boiler" written by a "hack writer."[1] Scholars within the newly emergent discipline of academic literary criticism tended to follow suit, dismissing the novel for much of the 20th century as a middling work of popular genre fiction, valued more for its wide-ranging influence than for any "intrinsic literary merit," and its late inclusion in the Oxford World's Classics series in 1983 prompted genuine scholarly debate.[2]

Yet it is wholly symptomatic of disciplinary developments within literary criticism over the past 40 years that, ever since *Dracula*'s official canonization, this apparent aesthetic deficiency has done nothing to hinder, and indeed has only fueled, aestheticizing close readings that celebrate its formal and stylistic complexity. After all, within a scholarly paradigm that claims (falsely) to renounce any concern for aesthetic quality and artistic intention alike – and yet which continues to valorize *negative* formal effects like ambiguity, mimetic distortion, narrative contradiction, and sheer convolutedness – few texts will prove more conducive to close reading than an "inartistic" work like *Dracula*, whose shoddy construction and wildly inconsistent style make it exceedingly rich in the bad kind of negative form.

And make no mistake, the novel *is* formally complex. Encountering the text for the first time, one will likely be struck by an obtrusive gimmick that rarely makes it into any of the novel's myriad adaptations. Despite telling a relatively simple story, *Dracula* unfolds in a highly fragmented manner, through a nonlinear assemblage of documents – "diaries, newspaper reports, phonographic transcriptions, log books, and other data"[3] – that exaggerates the epistolary, diaristic, and/or testimonial format of earlier Victorian sensation novels to a point that seems either insane or "postmodern" *avant la lettre*. Rarely, however, will one find so clear an illustration that formal complexity does not itself equate to artistic quality, despite literary critics' occasional conflation of the two. For beyond the cringy dialogue, mind-numbing (if hilariously ill-fitting) Christian piety, and repetitive set-pieces, what is most irritating about this novel is precisely its central formal gimmick.[4] Not because it is needlessly complicated – though the convoluted format does get away from Stoker from time to time – but rather for what it does, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, to the representation of memory. For in a seeming response to the disjunctions introduced by the novel's fragmentary form, the characters in *Dracula* are constantly compelled to *affirm connection* between the narrative segments, to "remind" the reader of past events that only happened within the fiction mere days or hours ago. The end result is a kind of radical foreshortening memory itself.[5] It's as if Plato's fear that the invention of writing would cause memory to atrophy had actually come true: the characters' obsession with recording their own experiences

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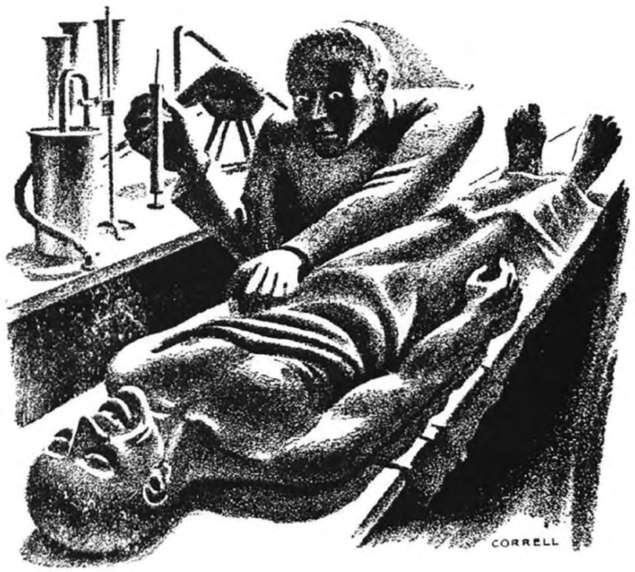
[1] Roger Luckhurst, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Dracula*, 3.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., 4.

[4] On gimmicks and irritation, see Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*.
[5] The foreshortening of memory in *Dracula* forms an interesting counterpart to the nostalgia that Nicholas Dames has analyzed in the Victorian novel – a radically limited mode of remembering that, by discarding anything not pleasant or useful to the self, essentially amounts to a forgetting. See Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870*.



An illustration to "Herbert West–Reanimator" by Richard V. Correll from a 1942 issue of *Weird Tales*. Lovecraft's 1922 story contains suggestive distortions of memory – the narrator keeps telling us basic facts we already know – but these are most likely an effect of the story's serial publication.

– thereby producing the very documents that we read – seems to damage their short-term memory, necessitating constant reminders of what has only just happened, and often forcing them to rely on precisely these documents, along with other physical *aides-memoires*, to affirm the reality of the recent past.

Here one may note, of course, that such "unrealistic" reminders sometimes served a real structural purpose in 19th- and early-20th-century fiction. Because many novels and stories of the time were published in serial installments, the reading of a narrative that we now experience as a unified work often took place amid significant temporal gaps, thus necessitating recaps and callbacks to ensure the reader's comprehension, just as the first episode in the new season of a TV drama might contain awkward reminders of the previous season's key developments that strike the binge-watching viewer as superfluous. Take, for instance, Lovecraft's story "Herbert West – Reanimator," which was published serially in 1922. Narrated in first-person and centering on two characters – the narrator and his brilliant classmate, Herbert West, who is obsessed with reanimating corpses – this short text nevertheless continuously reminds us of the most basic facts of their relationship. In the very first paragraph, the narrator notes of Herbert West: "I was his closest companion." Some 20 pages later, however, after we've done nothing but follow their partnership through the years, the narrator still sees fit to remind us again: "[Herbert West] was only too well known to me, who had been his closest friend and sole assistant since the old days in Miskatonic University Medical School at Arkham." And then he reminds us yet again a mere five pages later: "I was West's closest friend and only confidential assistant. We had met years before, in medical school, and from the first I had shared his terrible researches." [6]

[6] Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, 50, 71, 76.

No doubt, there may be something suggestive in this continual resetting, as if the narrative were repeatedly undergoing a kind of mind-wipe, awakening in each serial installment "without memory" like a reanimated corpse in its own right. But despite this thematic felicity, we must also acknowledge that the odd effect is almost certainly a function of the story's serial publication, a device by Lovecraft – one perhaps even more awkwardly implemented than usual in such cases – to keep the casual reader up to speed.

Dracula's reminders, however, lack such a structural motivation. This is what makes them so strange. Because *Dracula* was published in a single volume, we can't explain them as a pure readerly convenience. Instead, they seem to bear directly on the represented world, manifesting a radically impoverished mnemonic life among the characters that suggests either a collective anxiety about the reality of one's own past experiences or a kind of widespread brain damage. (As Mina Harker notes of her husband, the protagonist Jonathan Harker: "I don't like this lapsing into forgetfulness; it may make or continue some injury to the brain.") [7] Consider, for example, the early episode in which Lucy Westenra is discovered by Mina sleepwalking near a cliffside chapel while being visited in secret by Dracula. This harrowing event causes Mina no small amount of concern, and Lucy herself is disturbed enough that she asks her friend not to tell anyone "about her sleep-walking adventure." [8] Clearly, an experience of such strangeness and danger would seem to qualify as memorable. And yet, a mere seven days (and just as importantly, seven pages) later, Lucy, while conversing peacefully with Mina at the same chapel, nevertheless finds it necessary to recall the event as if forgetting it were an actual possibility. As Mina reports in her journal, "[Lucy] has just reminded me, as if I needed any reminding,

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[7] Stoker, *Dracula*, 161.
[8] Ibid., 88
[9] Ibid., 93.

It's often forgotten that Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897) is told through a complex agglomeration of documents, including journal entries, administrative records, and recordings. Francis Ford Coppola's film adaptation *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) tries to convey this aspect of the novel visually.

LIKE *DRACULA*, *BLOODBORNE* HAS ITS OWN MNEMONIC DISTORTIONS: ITS GOTHIC WORLD REPRESENTS MEMORY IN A DEEPLY WEIRD WAY

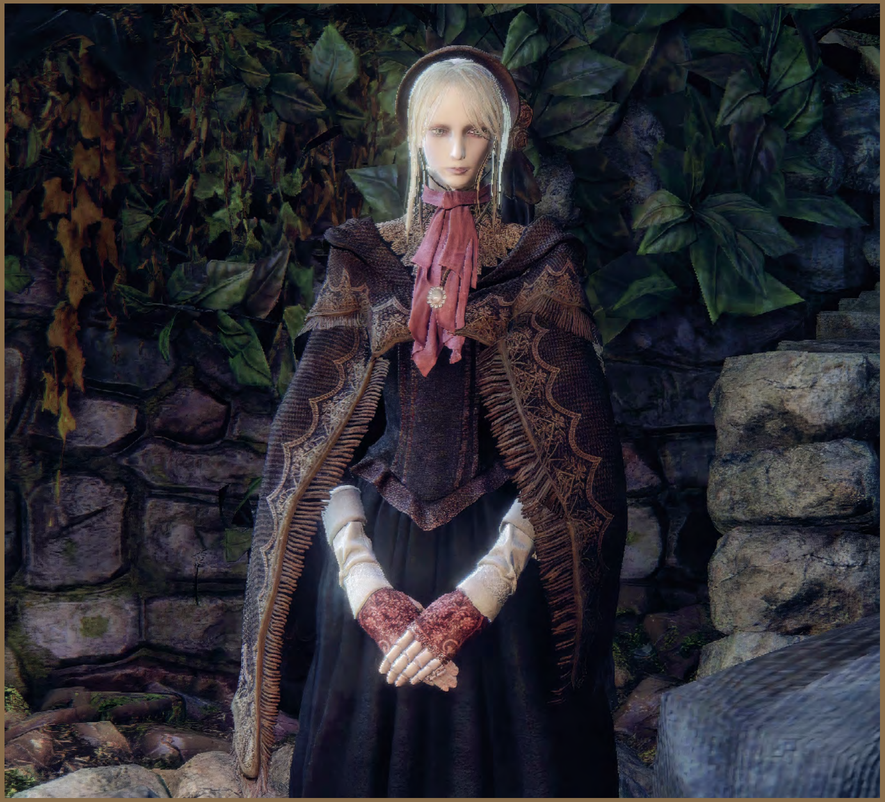
of *that* night, and that it was here, on this very seat, I found her asleep."[9] Here Mina gives voice to the very objection that *we* want to make – as if I needed any reminding! – yet rather than defusing the awkwardness of Lucy's pointless reminder, this acknowledgement merely increases our irritation and incredulity. Why is Lucy speaking of this just-narrated episode – "*that* night" – as if it happened months or years ago? It's as if she were able to conceive of time only in binary terms, through a simplistic past/present framework that treats everything she has experienced, be it minutes or years ago, as equally distant from the present moment. Such indeed describes the temporal structure of *Dracula* as a whole. The novel's fragmentary format does not merely sunder the individual segments from each other. It also freezes them retroactively, removing them from the organic flow of time and transfiguring the living events that they narrate into referential objects as static, inert, and external to one's mental life as actual historical documents. In short, *Dracula* and its characters experience the past primarily as *text* – as an externalized, bounded, and therefore "distant" object – thus flattening temporal existence in a way that would perhaps be philosophically interesting were it not so cheesy to read.

* * *

Still, if this existential impoverishment ultimately lowers *Dracula* in our estimation, it must be noted that *Bloodborne* has its own mnemonic distortions: its Gothic world likewise represents memory in a deeply weird way. We have already seen, for one, that your avatar suffers from a mysterious amnesia – a Gothic trope that's present in Stoker's novel as well. Yet *Bloodborne*'s greatest mnemonic enigma actually concerns the retentive capacity of the other characters. For amid the perpetual resetting of the gameworld whenever you die or warp to a location, it's never clear how much *Bloodborne*'s

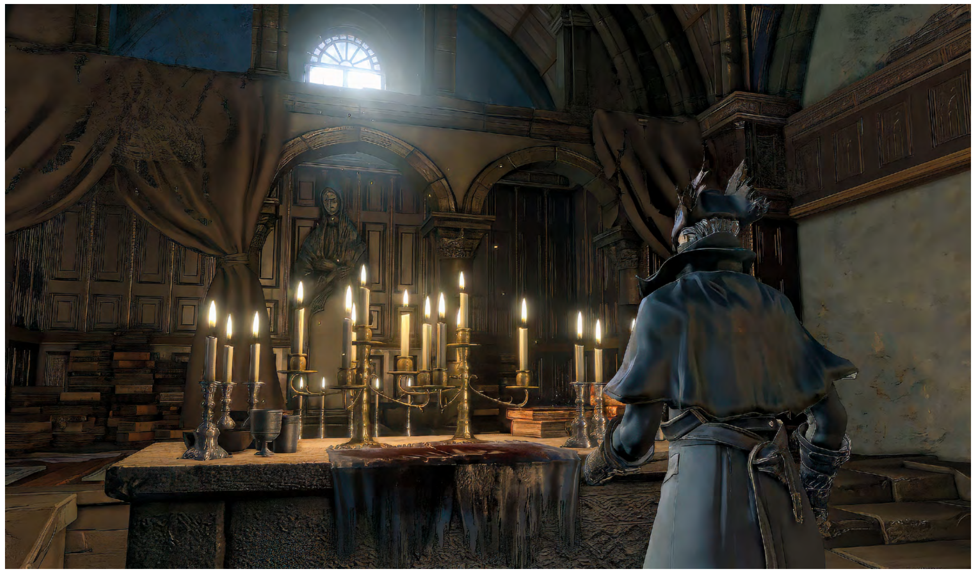
NPCs actually remember of what has transpired before each reset. Your rank-and-file enemies, for instance, seem even more devoid of memory than your avatar, whether because their minds have been rotted by the beast plague or because they alone are trapped in a kind of *Groundhog Day*-style time loop. No matter how many times you kill them, they always return to the same exact positions, opening themselves to the same ambushes and never making the slightest attempt to vary their tactics. Such is the case in most action games, of course, but because in Souls all of your character's deaths and rebirths actually happen within the fictional world, here the design norm becomes newly strange. If each repeat encounter is diegetic, then why do your enemies seem completely oblivious of the repetition as such? This amnesiac behavior, moreover, is curiously dissonant with the unusually retentive nature of *Bloodborne*'s gameworld itself. Open a door once and it will stay open forever, likewise for picking up an item or killing certain NPCs. Because of the Souls games' signature autosave system, you can't even manually load earlier game states to undo any of these actions. Your enemies remember nothing; the gameworld remembers everything.

Yet even this dissonance is inconstant. For not all NPCs are without memory: the various "sane" characters with whom you can converse – many of them linked to sidequests – will introduce themselves only once, and henceforth will treat you as a familiar acquaintance no matter how many deaths and world-reboots you experience between meetings. And should you attack them, they'll remember your act of aggression forever, either cowering in fear when you subsequently meet or attempting to kill you on sight. Granted, their memory isn't perfect: like most video game NPCs, they possess a limited store of dialogue, and will readily repeat the same sentences ad infinitum whenever prompted, thus revealing a kind of medium-spanning amnesia in the very act of expressing their comparative retentiveness. ("Stay away from me," shouts the Lonely Old Woman in the Cathedral Ward, "I know all



The Doll in the Hunter's Dream is *Bloodborne*'s avatar of memory. She's also, interestingly, the character who suffers the game's most narratively motivated case of amnesia.

your tricks": an expression of familiarity that she will eventually repeat, verbatim, every single time you try to talk to her during the game's first act.) Once again, however, this game-design norm is uniquely troubled in *Bloodborne* precisely by its unusual diegetic justification. For there is also one character who repeats her lines *for a reason*: the Doll. This NPC constitutes a kind of mnemonic fulcrum in *Bloodborne* by being at once its avatar of memory and the subject of its most fully realized, and motivated, case of amnesia. On the one hand, no other character thinks so often about memory as such. A kind of unofficial historian of the Hunter's Dream, the Doll seems to have personally taken on the task of memorializing past hunters: she informs you that the gravestones scattered about "stand in [the] memory" of the "countless hunters [who] have visited this dream," and in a rare bit of dialogue, she prays that the Dream itself will someday become "a fond, distant memory" for your victorious avatar. Nor is any other NPC so retentive. The Doll is the only character in *Bloodborne* who seems to remember not just your current avatar but your previous playthroughs, with special dialogue in New Game Plus that references your past self's ultimate escape from the Dream. At the same time, however, she alone of all NPCs suffers actual memory loss upon dying, and thus is the only one who can be attacked and killed without consequence. If one murders the Doll and then returns to the Hunter's Dream, the player will find her magically revived, and upon speaking to her she will repeat her first lines, introducing herself as if you'd never met: "Hello, good hunter. I am a doll, here in this dream to look after you..." This choice effectively highlights her artificiality, her status as a construct made for the sole purpose of serving Hunters, and hence evidently equipped with a convenient mnemonic blind spot despite her singular retentiveness in other respects. And yet, by expressing this artificiality through a foregrounded verbal repetition, she only lays bare the automaton-like quality of the other NPCs, who repeat their lines without any diegetic justification, and who indeed are supposed to be distinct from the Doll precisely on account of their functioning human minds. Herself an animated device, the Doll thus "lays bare the device" of repeating NPC dialogue precisely by *motivating* it, by justifying the redundancy through a diegetic amnesia that highlights this trope's resemblance to an actual mnemonic deficiency.



The Memory Altar in the Hunter's Dream allows you to "etch" eldritch runes into your mind. It's thus a device for *creating* memories rather than retaining them.

Your own memory, meanwhile, betrays similarly mechanical qualities, and does so, naturally, at the point when it becomes an actual game mechanic. Within Gehrman's chapel in the Hunter's Dream, one can eventually interact with an object called the Memory Altar: a special area where you can equip "runes" that grant various skills or stat boosts. Functionally, these runes are essentially items – the equivalent of rings in *Dark Souls* – that can be found in the world and added to your avatar's loadout like other pieces of gear. Within the fiction, however, they're in fact a form of language – words uttered by the Great Ones and transcribed by a famous student of Byrgenwerth college.

WHAT YOUR AMNESIAC AVATAR "REMEMBERS" WITH THE HELP OF THE MEMORY ALTAR IS THE TEXT AND NOTHING MORE

To equip them thus means precisely to *memorize* them: the Memory Altar is called such not because it stands testament to the past (like the graves outside the chapel), but rather because it facilitates the creation of new "memories" that will endure in the future. It's a kind of memorization-machine, a tool that transforms this hard mental work into an instantaneous process by reducing it to a form of writing: rather than learning each rune, the Memory Altar (according to the Rune Workshop Tool item description) allows you simply to "etch" it into your mind, where it will stay forever, like a kind of eldritch brain tattoo, until you choose to replace it with a different rune. [10] In this sense, it functions somewhat like the documents in *Dracula*, but on a more narratively explicit level. It is a mnemonic prosthesis that allows your avatar to remember thorough the textualization of memory itself. Yet here the resulting temporal impoverishment is even more severe. For such textual recording affords no access to the past: in *Bloodborne* what your amnesiac avatar "remembers" with the help of this prosthesis is the text and nothing more. If *Dracula*'s document structure thins out time for its characters, *Bloodborne*'s Memory Altar abolishes the link between time and memory altogether: even the inscription that both allows you to remember and constitutes the object of your remembering assumes a form – the rune – that is itself devoid of temporal value. What the game calls "memory" is thus really a pure effect of writing, of a static signifier whose very atemporality obviates the need for memory as such. Like an altar used for sanctification and sacrifice alike, this shrine to memory also represents the death of memory.

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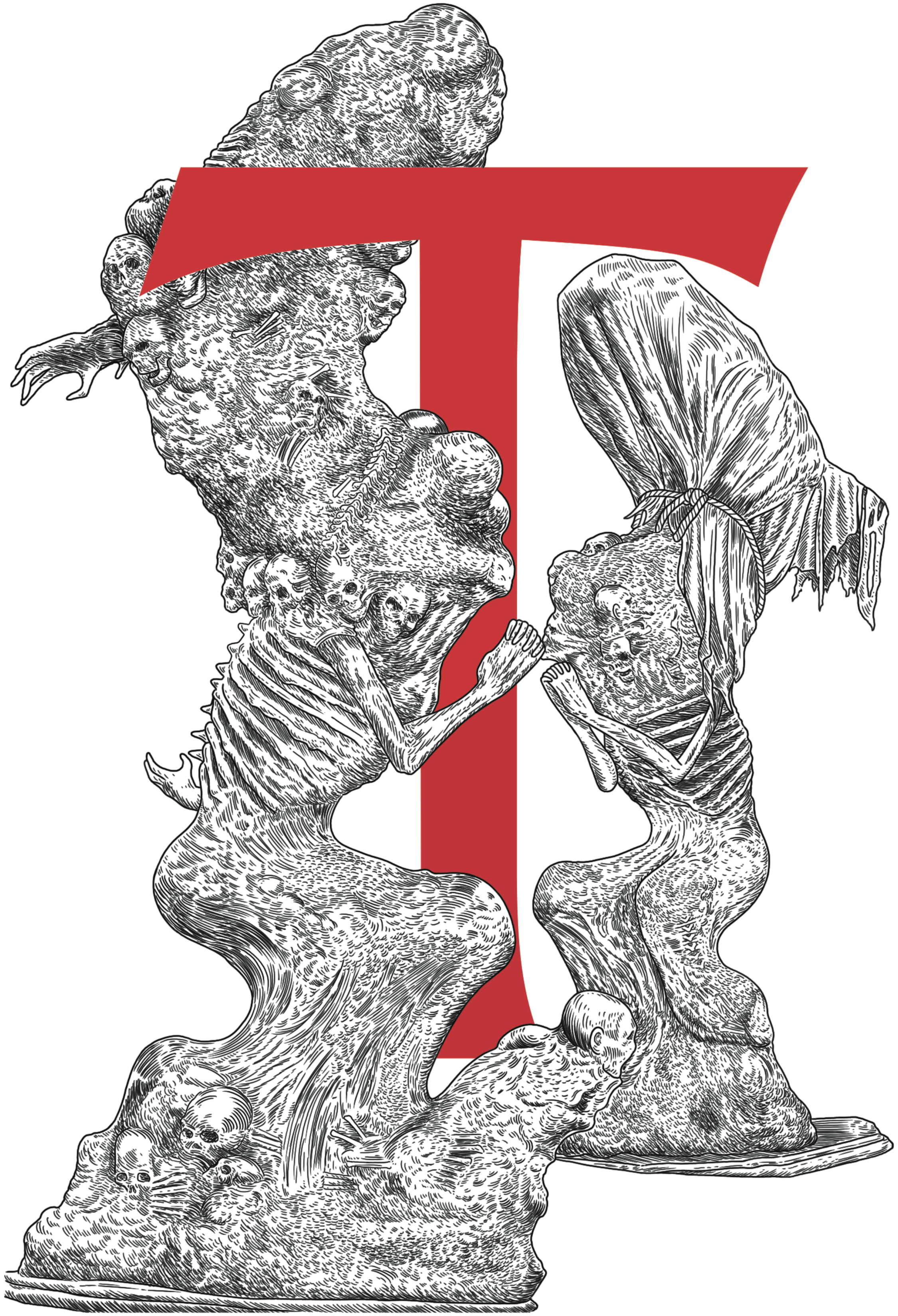
[10] "Runesmith Caryll, student of Byrgenwerth, transcribed the inhuman utterings of the Great Ones into what are now called Caryll Runes. The hunter who retrieves this workshop tool can etch Caryll Runes into the mind to attain their wondrous strength" (Item description, Rune Workshop Tool).

REVELATION

CHAPTER 13

On Statues, Time, and Plot Twists



CHAPTER 13

There's something weird about the statues in Yahar'gul, Unseen Village. While exploring this hidden refuge of the villainous Mensis cult early in the game, one will have noticed several statues along the main avenue whose partially covered states suggest a rather puzzling form of secrecy.

Seemingly built in the likeness of the grotesque amalgams of human flesh and body parts that will later patrol this same street after the blood moon appears, these tall, hunched, elongated stone figures have been wrapped in cloth and bound with rope at their upper regions, as if their "heads" were simply too horrible for public view. This act of concealment alone already raises questions, chief among them being how, given the extravagantly monstrous nature of the parts we *can see* – in which one can discern melded skulls, hands, and the occasional ribcage emerging from a shapeless column of pulpy flesh – their hidden parts could be any worse. Yet strange as this choice initially seems, it becomes even more baffling when the player finally encounters unconcealed versions of the same statues in a closed-off area of Yahar'gul later in the game, only to discover that the much-hyped "heads" of these figures in fact look barely any different from their bodies. By and large, they simply continue the rough-and-ready blend of arms, ribs, and crania already established below, with upper bodies that terminate not in an actual head – as the shape of the cloth coverings perhaps implied – but rather in a rounded, neckless mass that lacks any obvious facial features. Certainly, one could note that on one recurring statue model the topmost set of arms is more pronounced than the rest, while at the bottom of this figure's head area one can perhaps make out the suggestion of a chin and nose in profile – two features that may imply that what the Mensis School wished to hide was not the monstrousness of these forms but the place where they seem most human. But such readings are tenuous, and at best, serve to win a formalistic acknowledgement of corporeal difference from what is likely to be first experienced as an overwhelming impression of corporeal homogeneity. Contrast this moment of eldritch unconcealment with a hypothetical alternative in which, say, these statues' lower bodies were unmistakably human while their hidden upper forms were monstrous and alien, and the strange ambivalence of this world-building disclosure becomes clear. The trajectory of these statues between the player's first and second encounter with them presents the emphatic *form* of a revelation, a literal lifting of the veil, while leaving its actual content obscure. It is unmistakable that something has been revealed. But what?

In this respect, the Yahar'gul statues literalize the player's experience of the more famous revelation at *Bloodborne*'s center that occasions their unveiling in the first place: the appearance of the blood moon upon the death of Rom. Commentators have tended to make much of this transformation in the game's world state, which replaces the moonlit night of the previous temporal phase with a psychedelic purple sky, renders newly visible the enormous Amygdala creatures that have been lurking in Yharnam the whole time, and unlocks the gate to a new section of Yahar'gul where the player can witness the full extent of the city's eldritch infestation. Yet despite the visual spectacle of this transition, it's fair to ask how much of *Bloodborne*'s world really changes. Yharnam's physical layout remains exactly what it was, barely any new enemies appear in its streets, items and notes stay largely in the same places, and although some NPCs and their related questlines allow for new interactions, the way that this happens is perfectly consistent with the phased, world event-triggered progression system previously used for NPC interactions both in *Bloodborne* and the Souls series at large. Even the unveiling of the eldritch Amygdalae is not quite the generic transformation from the Gothic to the Cosmic that it's often made out to be. Not only is the player already able to interact with these creatures' cloaked yet still discernible forms before the blood moon – thus spilling the beans on the game's eldritch secret as soon as one gets to the Cathedral Ward midway through the first act – but one can also fight a fully

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT THE BLOOD MOON IS THE IDEA THAT IT HAS BEEN THERE ALL ALONG, LOOMING SECRETLY OVER YHARNAM

visible Amygdala in the Nightmare Frontier, while minor alien beings, the Martian-like Celestial Emissaries, can be encountered in both the Forbidden Woods and Iosefka's clinic well before the death of Rom discloses eldritch phenomena to human sight. In short, as with the Yahar'gul statues, what the blood moon makes a big show of unveiling looks a lot like what we could already see.

Yet if this twist reveals little that we didn't already know or guess on the level of physical reality, it nevertheless implies a profound transformation of the logical categories through which we perceive that reality. For as we will only learn belatedly, the most important thing about the blood moon is not its intrinsic appearance or effects, but rather the idea – never confirmed but strongly suggested – that it has been there all along, looming secretly over Yharnam for years if not for centuries, and hence that the temporal concepts of "evening" and "night" that have so far organized the player's progress through *Bloodborne* were merely epiphenomenal structures overlaid upon a static reality in which the day as such no longer exists. *Bloodborne*'s true revelation thus concerns the temporal stasis of the "real" Yharnam, and what is cast aside in this unveiling is the whole notion of diurnal time itself.[1]

This second revelation, however, can't be gleaned from the blood moon in its own right, since what matters is not the sheer fact of the moon's existence (along with that of all the alien beings it has exposed to human perception), but rather its unnatural, unmeasurable *preexistence* – a fact that can only be grasped logically, through an inference about where this object of revelation itself fits within *Bloodborne*'s timeline. The blood moon's unveiling feels like an anticlimax because its true significance is purely relational, a matter of context rather than content.

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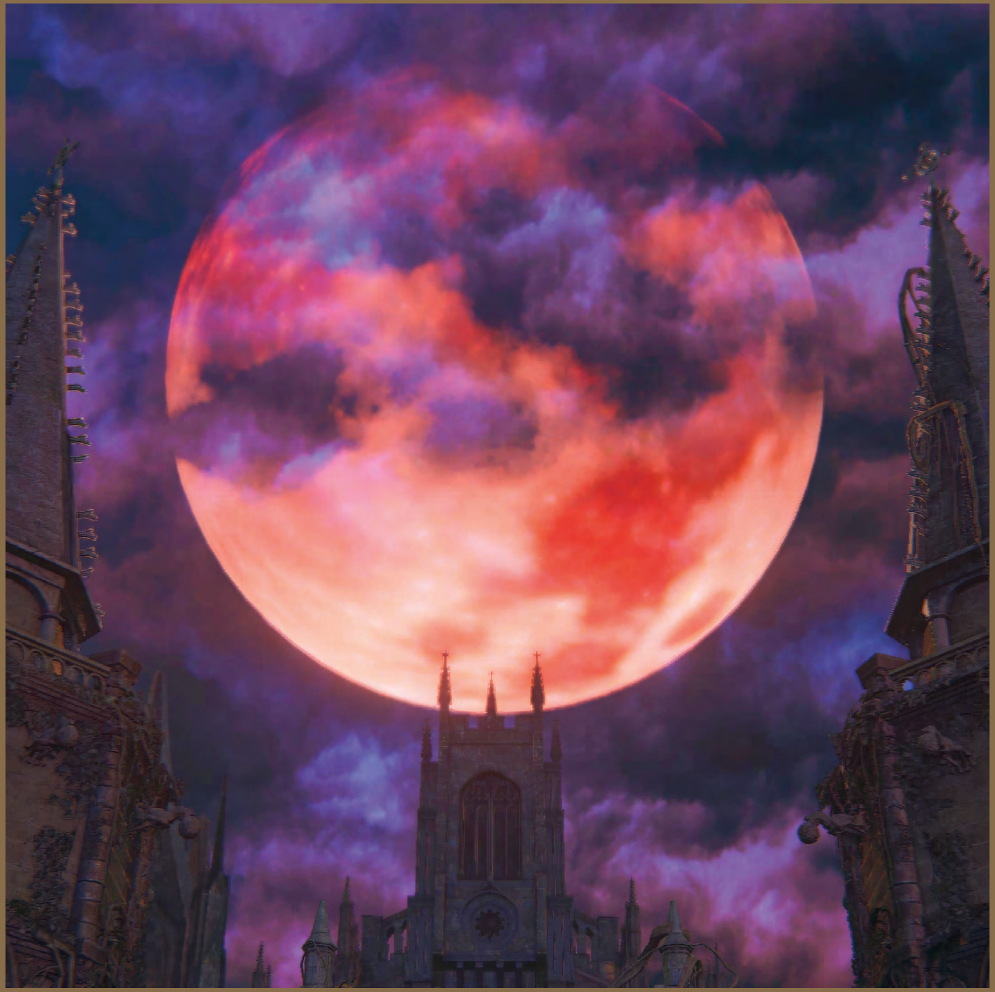
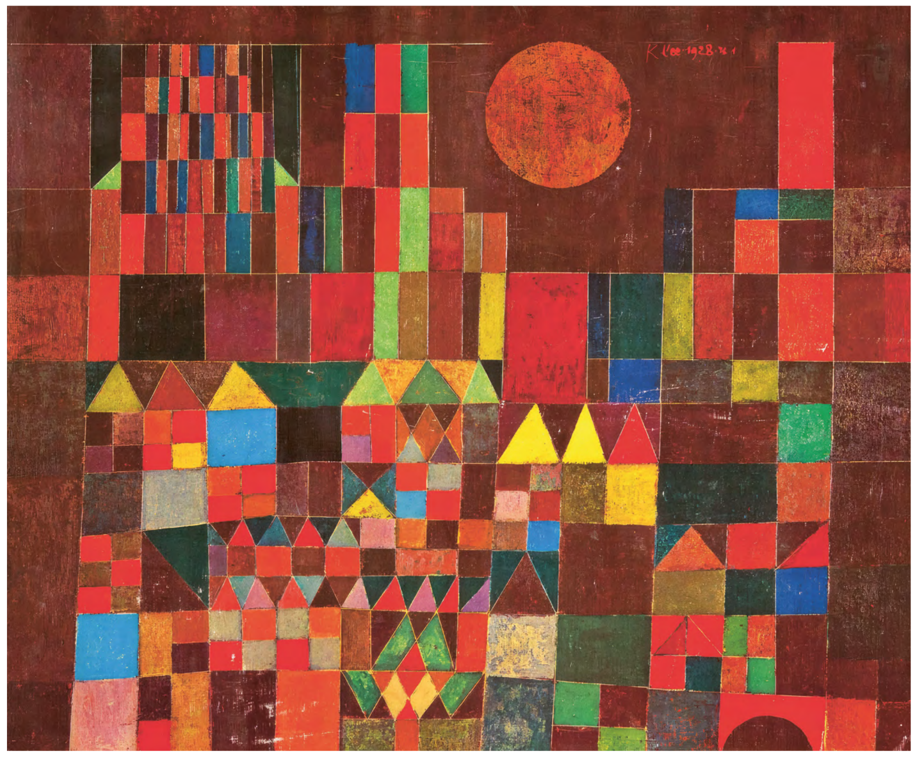
[1] Diurnal time – but not time as such. Actually, the paradox of this reading is that time still seems to pass even while the blood moon remains fixed in the sky: one major clue that the blood moon has been around for a long time is the mummified state of the Mensis scholars who supposedly summoned it. When the player finds these corpses in Advent Plaza, they're decayed to a degree that implies an interval of decades, if not longer.

This contextual inference can be made at a few points, but it's prompted most forcefully by a note found in the middle of Yahar'gul's main avenue, just a few steps from the covered statues. When first traversing this area, the player may puzzle over a short inscription – "Behold! A Paleblood sky!" – whose referent is not only ambiguous but indeed radically unstable, since this note, like any written message, stays the same no matter the time of day in *Bloodborne*'s temporal cycle that one reads it. (In real life, of course, a plaque bearing the message "Behold! The full moon!" would either represent the height of ontological confusion or a Dadaist riff on the proverbial accuracy of broken clocks.) But upon returning to this street during the blood moon, the *message's* referent is now revealed to be the unearthly sky that hangs over all of Yharnam. Or rather, we should say that the revelation of this sky, occurring just before one's return to Yahar'gul, is what belatedly reveals the message's own accuracy as a description of reality. That this reference thus turns out to be completely "felicitous" (in the parlance of language theorists) is a paradox that constitutes the strongest hint yet to *Bloodborne*'s distorted timeline. For assuming we take this message seriously as a written command to future residents of Yahar'gul (rather than, say, the beginning of a Romantic ode written in a flash of inspiration on the spot, or a time-sensitive message to the civic population – a la "Take shelter!" or "Paris burns!" – etched in the heat of an unfolding crisis), then the logical bombshell here consists in our disorienting realization of the message's apparently *changeless* descriptive validity as it records the state of a perceptual object, the sky, that represents humanity's primordial model and measure of temporal change as such. Our normal understanding of time-



The blood moon – or "Paleblood sky" – as seen from Advent Plaza in Yahar'gul, Unseen Village.



Castle and Sun (1928) by Paul Klee. Although this is technically a representation of the sun, Klee's painting strikingly resembles the player's first glimpse of the blood moon looming over the gothic spires of Yahar'gul.

contextual reference is here thrown into disarray. It's as if a philosophical test case for the ever-shifting relation between a statement and reality, e.g. "It is night outside," were elevated into an eternally valid truth – as if the philosopher's cat not only found itself "on" the proverbial mat but were fused there until the end of time.

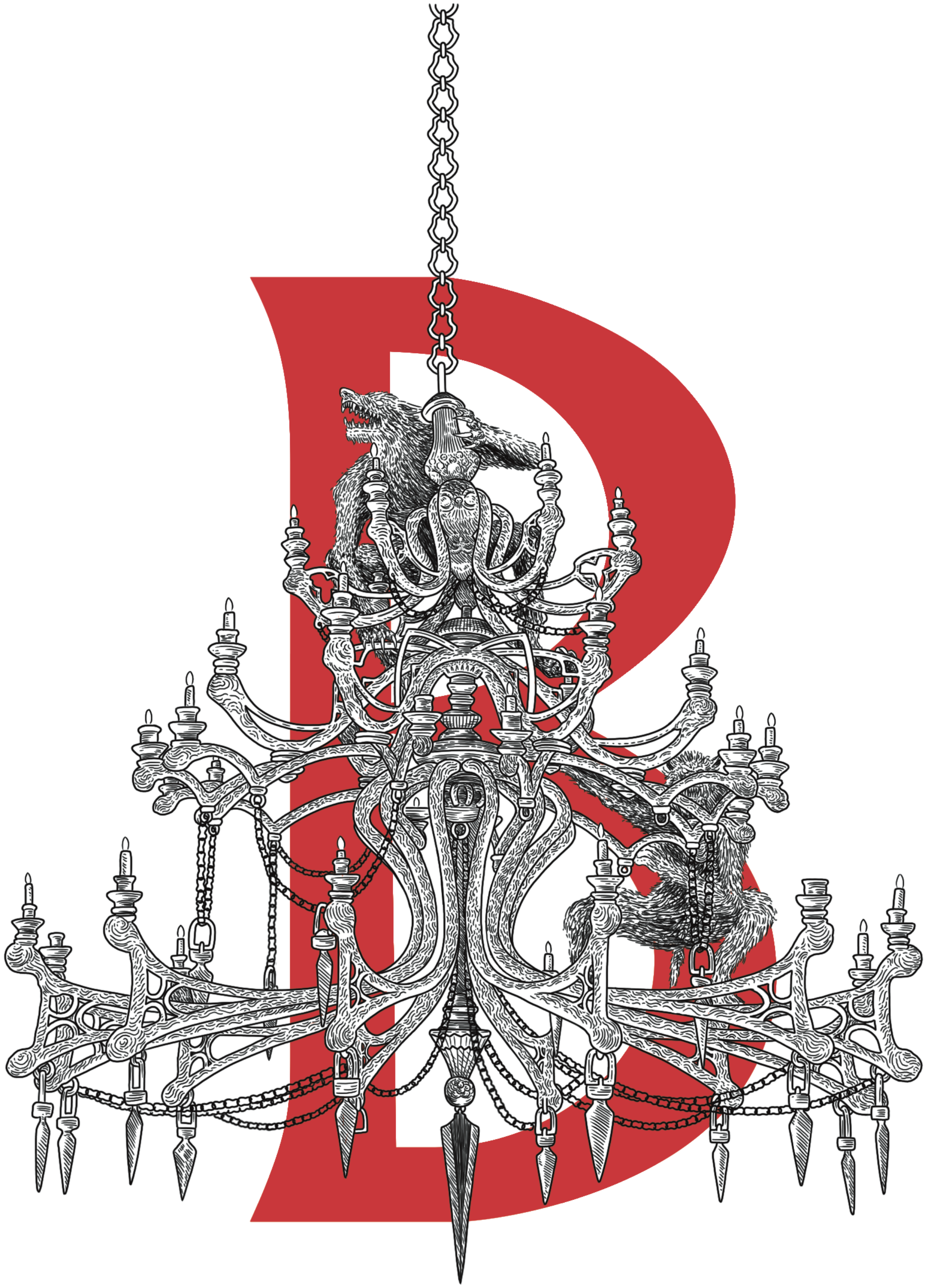
This temporal paradox, moreover, also estranges the temporal form of narrative revelation itself. For if the essence of this form is to disclose a truth "that was there all along," here *Bloodborne* reveals that what was there all along was precisely a structure of unnatural duration – or all-alongness – as such. [2] Just as the Yahar'gul statues objectify the pure form of physical unveiling, this disclosure reduplicates revelation's pure temporal logic. Yet the formal recursiveness of this moment doesn't end there. For we must note again that all of this meaning is gathered contextually: in itself, what the message brings forcefully to our attention is a phenomenon, the blood moon sky, that we must assume to have been already visible to its intended audience. In another echo of the nearby statues, the inscription thus uses the form of a revelation – "Behold!" – to register a fundamental continuity. In this case, however, the self-reflexive game extends even further, since here the object of revelation is but another "empty" revelation, namely the Paleblood Sky itself, which we have already seen functions merely as the visible sign of a more significant logical transformation occurring beyond the domain of the sensible. The player's realization of the game's warped temporality thus emerges from the contextual interplay between two spectacular disclosures that are themselves largely devoid of revelatory content. Strictly speaking, *Bloodborne*'s true "aha!" moment is a revelation about the purely logical relation between two revelations – a plot twist that twists the plot form of epiphany back on itself.

[2] On all-alongness and the Blood Moon, see Redgrave, *The Paleblood Hunt*, 77, 79.

WIND

CHAPTER 14

On Atmosphere

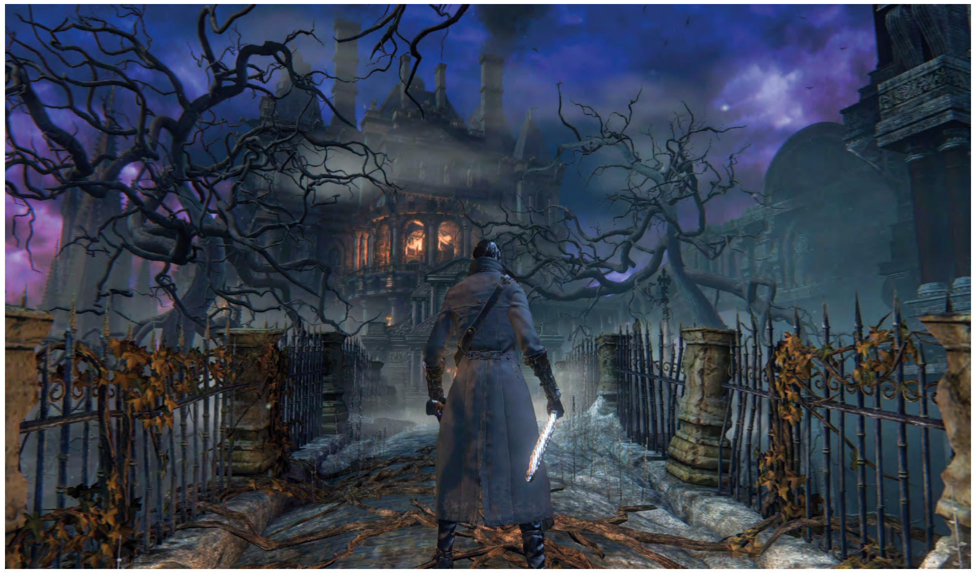


CHAPTER 14

Bloodborne's high point of atmospheric design fittingly occurs at the gameworld's highest point: the Orphanage building near the summit of the skyscraper-sized Grand Cathedral. [1] Entering this area via a narrow bridge from a nearby tower, one is immediately met with a pair of aural anomalies. Not only is this the only location in Yharnam proper with non-diegetic music – dissonant strings and a repeating sequence of two high, sustained vocal notes – but here the city's omnipresent wind also howls like nowhere else, rising from a merely ambient sound effect to an annihilating blast. [2]

This wind bears several meanings. On the most basic level, it signifies vast spatial extension as such. We have seen how Faulkner writes of "the windy sunlight of space," a synesthetic experience of raw three-dimensionality that he contrasts with the uncanny two-dimensionality of his fictional world's "ultimate edge." Indeed, as signifiers of virtual 3D space, light and wind go together. If light, as Paul de Man writes, "implies space" and thereby "implies the possibility of spatial differentiation," then wind implies an extension of that space beyond the scale of the human: what's important for Faulkner and *Bloodborne* alike is that we now feel *vastness itself*, whether that mean the majestic scale of the game's continuous 3D city (of which we're now afforded a sweeping view) or the infinitude of a Yoknapatawpha landscape that now suffers a jarring, surreal negation. [3]

But the wind in *Bloodborne*'s Upper Cathedral Ward also bears a ludic significance, despite lacking any tangible gameplay functionality. For purely by virtue of its aural intensity, this wind – along with the anomalous music that likewise activates our hearing – announces the area's main gimmick, which is precisely the intensification of aural awareness and the corresponding negation of sight as a means of navigating space. Upon entering the Orphanage's main hall, a werewolf brings the central chandelier crashing down, plunging the whole building into darkness and forcing the player to rely primarily on their ears to detect nearby foes. Hearing, so far almost exclusively an "aesthetic" sense in *Bloodborne*, thus becomes newly pertinent to actual gameplay, while sight loses some of its usual primacy. This sensory reversal, moreover, nicely recapitulates one of *Bloodborne*'s central themes. As we've seen, both story and game mechanics suggest that vision is deceptive, serving merely to mask the eldritch reality that lies beneath the surface of things. Indeed, the members of Yharnam's Healing Church – the governing body whose highest-ranking officers are housed in this very building – renounce sight itself by covering their eyes with cloth. This building's unique gameplay challenge thus reflects the doctrine of its owners.



And yet, this very thematic felicity also leads to a mimetic paradox. For if by chance your avatar has been donning one of the game's many pieces of headgear that cover their own eyes – for instance, a repurposed Healing Church hat, or a Cainhurst Helmet that covers the entire face with a solid sheet of metal – then the fact that cutting out the lights invariably transforms the *player*'s experience of this space makes little sense. After all, in accordance with normal action-game logic, equipping such headpieces has no effect on how your avatar controls or what you're able to see: within the diegetic reality established by gameplay, your avatar has already transcended the use of physical eyesight. That they're now likely reduced to a bumbling, panicked mess thus jars with this apparent superpower. Strictly speaking, the very fear

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[1] An earlier version of this chapter originally appeared at *Venti Journal and Collective* in a winter 2023 discussion on "Wind" for the recurring forum "Up in the Air."

[2] There is chanting during your first visit to Yahar'gul, but it seems to be diegetic.

[3] De Man, "Anthropomorphism and the Trope in Lyric," 258. T. J. Clark writes about de Man's passage in *Farewell to an Idea*, 219-20.

that the player now feels through immersion in their avatar's situation is a disruption of true characterological identification.

Yet when did mimetic coherence ever matter to the production of atmosphere? This is one of the striking things about this strange, elusive aesthetic concept. Though it's often produced through representational effects – light, smoke, mist, weather – strict "realism" is often secondary. [4] The darkness of the Orphanage creates a powerful mood regardless of whether it's mimetically justified. And the same is true for the howling wind outside. A meteorological aberration, this wind ceases abruptly when one reaches the terrace at the bridge's end, exactly like the artificial sound effect that it is. As with Faulkner's "windy sunlight of space," here an enveloping sensory reality thus stops short against a flat, arbitrary border, producing an apparent violation not only of realistic wind but of the all-encompassing nature of atmosphere itself. [5] And yet, as in Faulkner, our immersion in the virtual world readily assimilates such spatial dissonance. What is "atmospheric" about Faulkner's sentence, after all, is not this windy sunlight alone, and surely not the "painted cardboard set" that resists it, but rather their uncanny conjunction.

Similarly, in *Bloodborne* this meteorological violation has its own atmospheric power. For cutting out the wind here serves precisely to foreground the ambient

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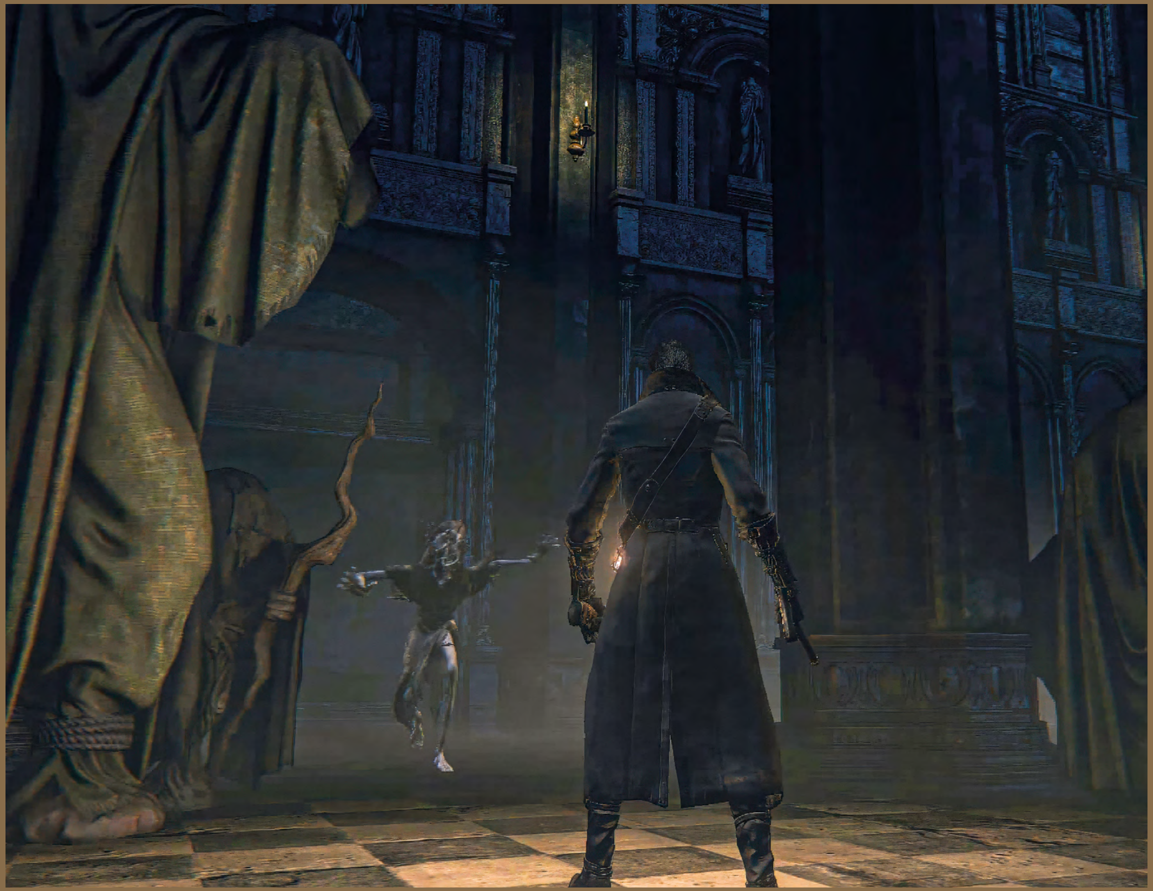
[4] Jayne Elizabeth Lewis explores the relations between literary atmosphere and literal air (a category that naturally includes the weather) in *Air's Appearance: Literary Atmosphere in British Fiction, 1660-1794*. On weather and literary atmosphere, see also Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's chapter on Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, 72-81.

[5] Writing of a suggestive passage about the weather in Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, Bryan Counter notes how atmosphere can de-differentiate space, producing "a confusion of the boundary between inside and outside" ("Disinterest and the Impersonal Resonance of Aesthetic Experience," 26).



When sneaking through the darkness of the Orphanage, the player must remain constantly alert to the telltale slurping noises and squishy footsteps of the deadly Brainsuckers, lest they ambush you and drain your Insight. For the first time in *Bloodborne*, hearing thus becomes arguably as important as vision to your survival.

CUTTING OUT THE WIND SERVES TO FOREGROUND THE AMBIENT MUSIC THAT HAS SO FAR LARGELY BEEN OBSCURED BY THE BRIDGE'S DEAFENING GUSTS

music that has so far largely been obscured by the bridge's deafening gusts. In a certain sense, this so-called "Soothing Hymn" now *sublates* the wind, at once negating the latter and assimilating it into the track's monotonous and indeed somewhat windlike drone. [6] If this change happened "realistically," say, upon crossing the threshold of the Orphanage building itself, such melding would fail to occur, since instead of *becoming* the wind the music would simply replace it. This is why it's crucial that the sonic transfer – and transformation – happens outdoors. Assaulting our ear at first under the guise of physical nature, the wind must finally die (rather than die down) to be reborn as spirit, as an essence that pervades this area whether you are inside or out. Just as atmosphere homogenizes a space amid that space's manifest differentiations, here the very aural effects that produce atmosphere – wind and music – are themselves unified through an unnatural spatial boundary. With the death of the wind, the "Soothing Hymn" becomes a windy darkness.

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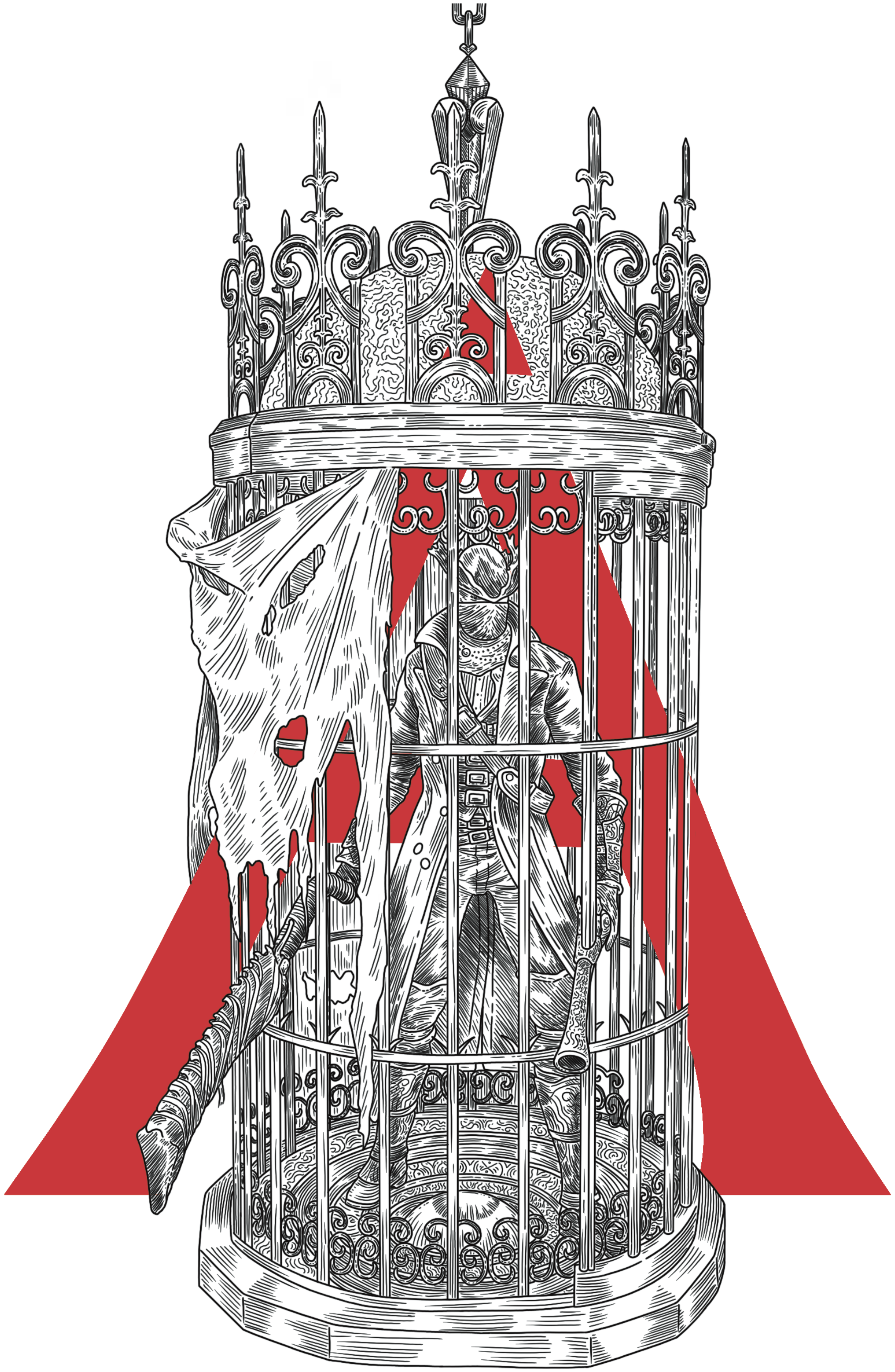
[6] The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel used the word *Aufheben* (commonly translated as "sublation") to refer to a paradoxical conceptual movement by which a thing, idea, or argument is simultaneously "canceled" and "preserved."

CLIPPING

CHAPTER 15

On Embarrassment

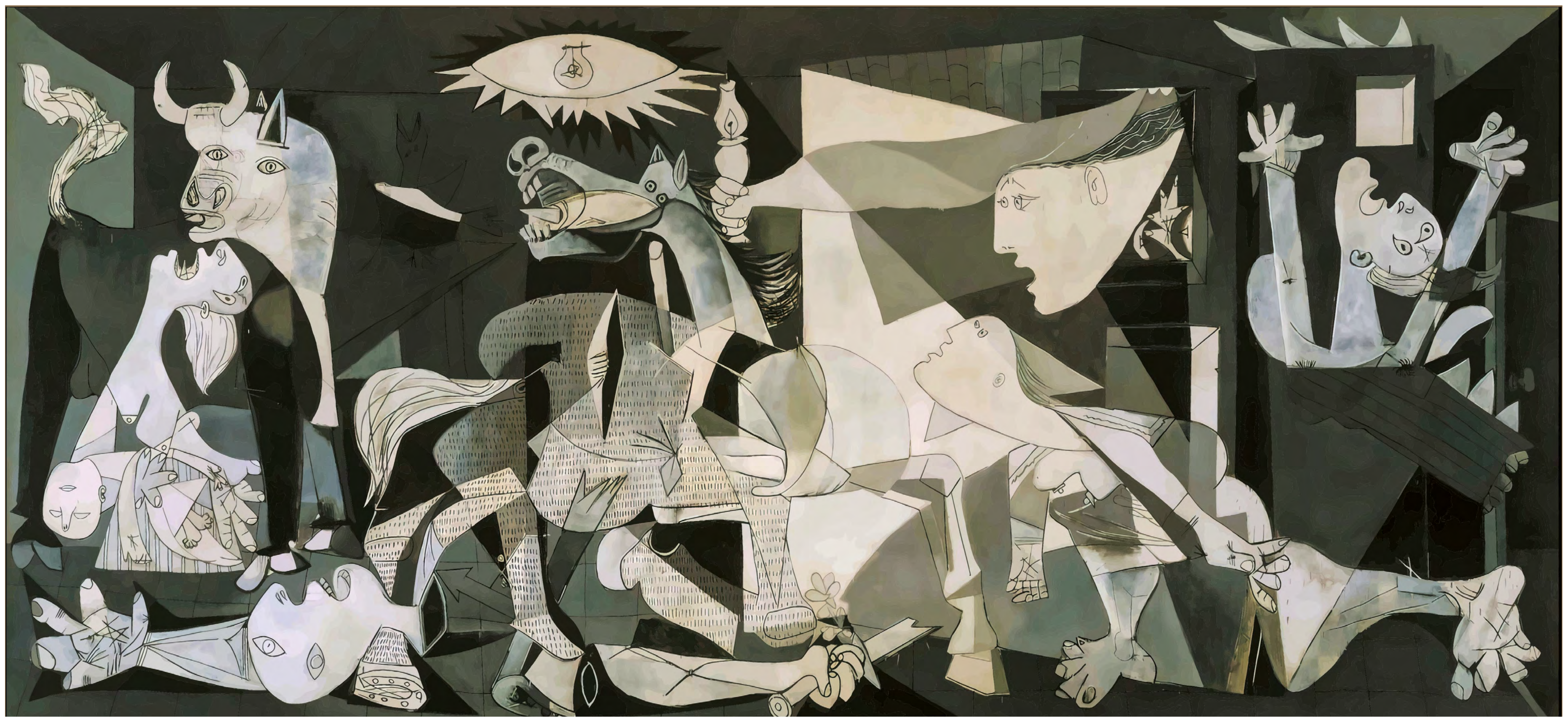


CHAPTER 15

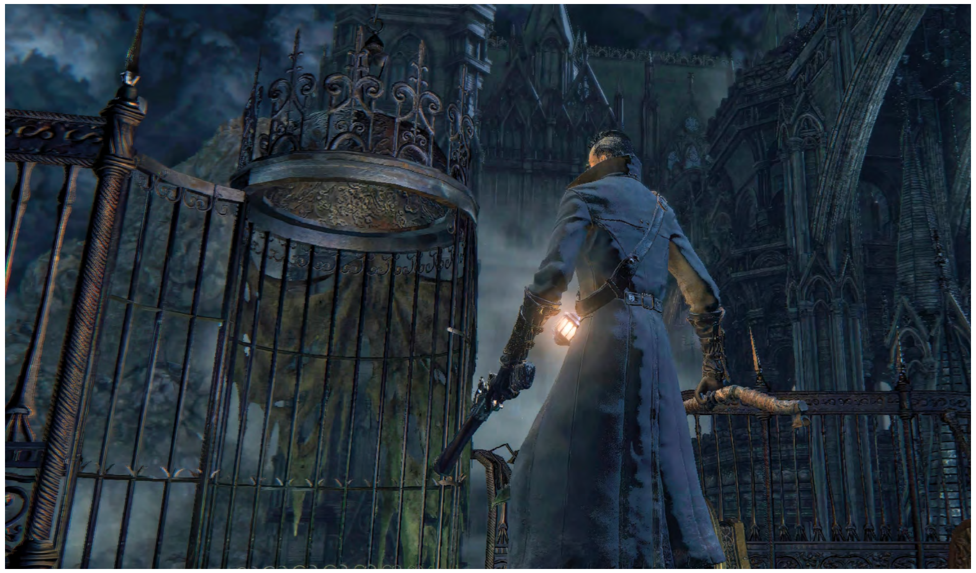
A tiresome trope of games writing: the author begins by launching us "right into the action," by expressing a version of their own immersive experience within the virtual world through a lush descriptive replay that "paints a vivid picture" of what it's like to play the game: *Climbing a steep bank in the Nightmare of Mensis, past outcroppings of volcanic rock in which distorted human faces can be discerned, I tiptoe around a boulder-throwing giant and step into a cylindrical cage that rises slowly toward the upper reaches of the looming castle…*

It's not just that such "immediate" descriptions are often slightly off-putting in their detailed communication of a wholly private pleasure, as if one were giving a precise account of the experience of eating one's lunch. They also fall into a graver conceptual error through their narratorial commitment to representing the game's own represented experiences as if they were "real." This is strictly a question of mimetic form rather than of psychological fantasy or delusion: the issue lies purely in the fact that whatever the nature and style of the game's own representations, the description gives a "realist" version of them, denoting them simply as experiential facts of an existing world rather than recording their particular qualities as representations, and thus tacitly accepting them as entirely the things that they stand for. To offer a brief analogy: in communicating what it's like to view Picasso's *Guernica*, one would not simply describe the signified, real-world content of the represented "scene" – *a bull looms above a screaming woman, a distraught man kneels beneath a window* – unless one were performing an experiment in linguistic defamiliarization, in showing just how inadequate the pure description of mimetic content is to capturing the experience of a painting. And video game representations are even more volatile and unpredictable than this, since they're defined not just by *how they look* – 2D or 3D, pixel-based or polygonal, cel-shaded or photorealistic – but, more importantly, by the kind of experiences and actions their ludic systems allow. Whatever archetypal narrative scenes the phrase successfully calls to mind, to say *I tiptoe past a giant* communicates little else if we do not already understand the structure of necessarily delimited space in which this action occurs (traversal in games is meaningful precisely to the extent that it is restricted), the game's logic of bodily movement ("tiptoeing" is a metaphor: in *Bloodborne* you are able to move in exactly three speeds; you have limited control over your avatar's legs), and the ludic consequences of the combat encounter that one is presumably trying to avoid (is this scenario scripted? does getting spotted induce an instant fail state? can you fight the giants or are you forced to run? is the combat real-time, turn-based, or text-based?), among countless other variables necessary to the construction of a video game world. Beyond their intrinsic rhetorical pleasure as writing, the most that such descriptions can offer is an impression of the *kind* of scenarios a game simulates that reveals little about how they're actually experienced.

Moreover, even when we limit our attention to the visual level and compare the verbal description to what's happening onscreen, certain discrepancies often emerge that may cast doubt on the entire descriptive project. How, for instance, can this form of narration capture the (to me) all-important fact that when one steps into the cylindrical cage-elevator in the Nightmare of Mensis, one's protruding weapon invariably "clips" through the iron bars, sweeping freely through their solid bulk as if they were made of thin air? This graphical quirk expresses a basic paradox in the series' treatment of solid bodies. For on the one hand, such clipping occurs everywhere: whenever you rotate your avatar near a wall, for instance, or whenever you don a cloak or floppy hat and a back-mounted weapon at the same time. (Nothing says high fashion like a frilled cape whose textural overlap with your



How could you even begin to describe Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) through language alone? Video games – which are often just as abstract and fragmented in their representations of reality – pose a similar problem.



protruding scabbard explodes its illusion of solidity with each billow and furl). And yet, Souls is also the only action series I know in which solid surfaces can become stubbornly, meaningfully impermeable to your avatar's weapons. Unlike nearly every other game, if you swing your sword near a wall, it will sometimes (but not always!) bounce off like a real piece of metal, interrupting your attack and rendering you vulnerable to a slapstick deathblow that would be hilarious were it not so enraging.[1] Narrow hallways in Souls are the melee player's bane. On the most general level, one may thus feel compelled to ask not only why the designers find it necessary to place such an annoyingly "realistic" physical restriction on the act of fighting in tight quarters (especially when your foes are maddeningly exempt from it: they will kill you through walls, doors, and columns any time they get the chance), and likewise, why they find it acceptable to make the same surfaces goofily permeable in every other respect, but perhaps most crucially, *why they allow these two antithetical treatments of solid surfaces to exist together in the same work.* No doubt, one can immediately venture an easy explanation for the inconsistency in itself: these two visions of solidity are of course categorically distinct, since the pervasive clipping is a purely "aesthetic" issue bearing strictly on the representation of the physical world, while the resistance of walls to your weapon swings is a functional element of gameplay. Yet although this explanation may account for the design philosophy behind this metaphysical disjunction, it does not resolve its felt intensity. For it's not just that these two treatments of surfaces are different, but that they're both radicalized in opposite, and indeed deviant, directions. Just as few blockbuster action games are as careless about clipping (a Naughty Dog or Rockstar game wouldn't be caught dead with the kind of graphical wardrobe malfunctions that are a dime a dozen in Souls), even fewer would risk interrupting the player's combat flow by making their inputs randomly subject to the brute contingencies of solid matter. Whatever the design justification for this discrepancy, the end result is a fundamental contradiction in the player's experience of solid surfaces as such.

But the cage-lift in the Nightmare of Mensis also poses a more specific question. For there is something deeply perverse about the fact that in this tiny enclosure clipping is not just an accepted side effect of the game's engine, but an inevitability. There's no way for this climactic elevator ride not to look ridiculous: even *Bloodborne*'s smallest weapon, the untransformed Blade of Mercy, still pokes distractingly through the metal bars. On a more local level, one thus wonders why the designers didn't simply make the cage *bigger*, such that the player who is invested in maintaining their physical immersion in the gameworld might avoid clipping through the bars and spoiling the moment. Faced with this artistic enigma, one could perhaps read into it two conflicting designer

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[1] This mechanic is significantly toned down in *Bloodborne* – it seems to be mainly charge attacks and the second or third swings in combos that are able to bounce off walls, and moreover only with certain weapons – but this only makes it more frustrating, since you don't even know when to take it into account during combat.

IN SEEKING TO EXPLAIN THE CHOICE ONE MUST ENTERTAIN THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE *BLOODBORNE* DESIGNERS SIMPLY DIDN'T CARE

imperatives. On one hand, we might imagine that the creators would have wished to avoid so blatant a graphical flaw if all things were truly equal. Yet it also seems important that this elevator is a *cage*: its claustrophobic fit around your avatar's body is precisely its "point," both as a significant object in the storyworld (what kind of weird shit have these Mensis scholars been up to?) and as a purely visual conceit. If, however, this latter reasoning truly accounts for the cage's tininess, then the choice seems counterproductive. For it leads to a genuine contradiction in the represented object. Whereas the clipping that is normally accepted everywhere else in Souls usually involves surfaces that are indifferent to your bodily proximity, here what is rendered immaterial is precisely the solid ironwork meant to restrict your movements. The unavoidable clipping makes this lift a kind of anti-cage.

To read the cage as an artistic flaw in this way, however, still assumes that the designers made a concession during the creative process, i.e., that a need to make the cage genuinely "constricting" trumped the weaker, but still real, desire to avoid such egregious clipping if possible. But this assumption is wholly speculative, and in seeking to explain the choice one must also entertain the possibility that, quite to the contrary, they simply didn't care. To me, a person obsessed with their own failures and shortcomings, such reasoning is as alien and unfathomable as any of *Bloodborne*'s eldritch gods. Yet I ultimately believe it to be the case. For such a beautiful game, *Bloodborne* is authentically – *inconceivably* – careless of its own appearance, like a child who makes themselves look ridiculous not from some ironic or otherwise performative will,

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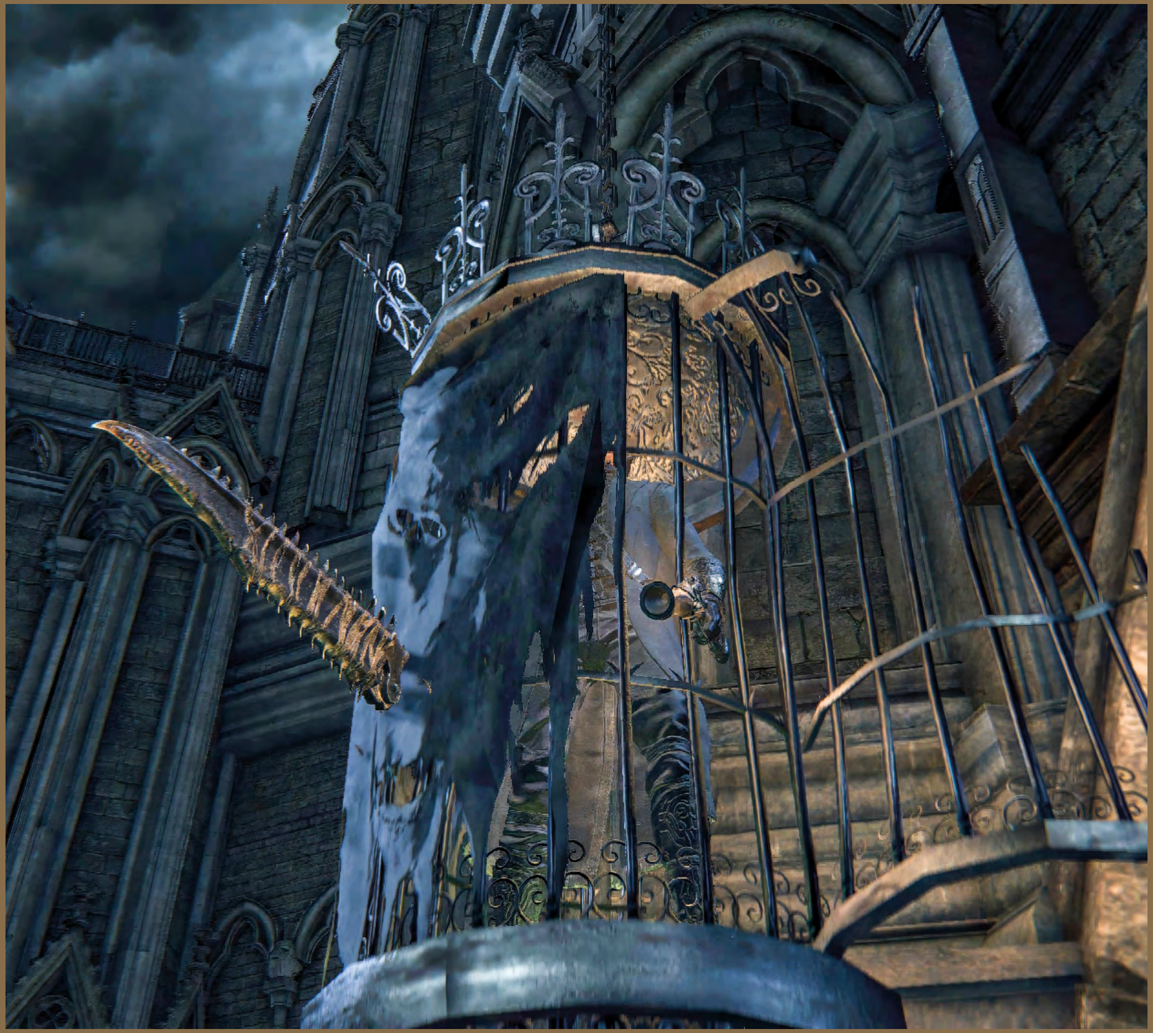
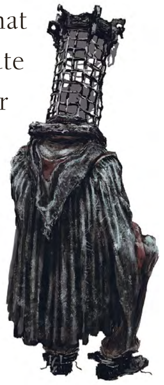
[2] Theodor Adorno makes this crucial distinction in his essay "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening" (*The Culture Industry*, 46-47).





but rather according to a private value system in which what they wear, its sheer fact as a thing in the world, is an absolute end in itself. To the complaint that the cage is too small for *Bloodborne*'s graphical engine, I can imagine the designers responding blankly, and without a hint of embarrassment: it's small because it's a cage. Such childlikeness (the opposite, of course, of childishness) [2] in the game's self-presentation is in no way a mark of regression, naivety, or "innocence." On the contrary, it requires the utmost discipline to attain. One must radically suspend all vanity and self-consciousness, just as the School of Mensis sought to suspend "the will of the self" by wearing – what else? – cages on their heads. [3] The clipping cages within the Nightmare of Mensis and the Mensis School's signature accessory thus express the same inscrutable, egoless disposition: for all the goofy memes these head-cages have generated, nothing is more indicative of *Bloodborne*'s ascetic ignorance of its own ridiculousness than the fact that it's impossible to tell whether they're supposed to be funny.

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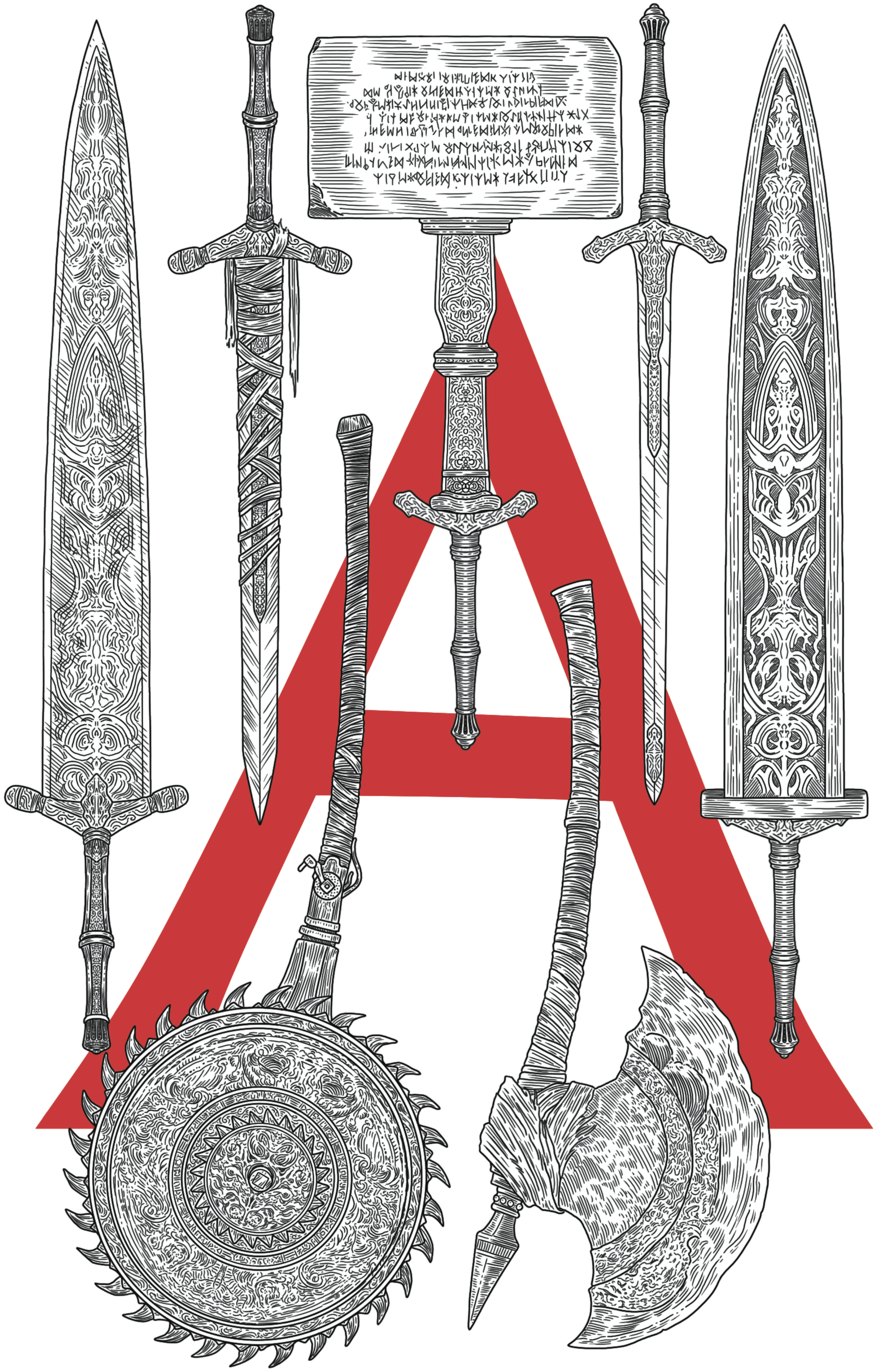
[3] Item description, Mensis Cage.

RARE ITEM

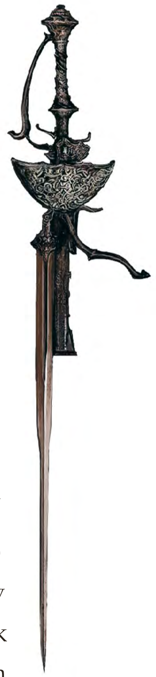
CHAPTER 16

On Loot, Labor, and Value



CHAPTER 16

As one games-of-the-decade list would have it, "*Bloodborne*, as weird as it sounds, is like an antique clock. The elements that make up the game are like precisely-machined materials where each piece clicks and glides into each other perfectly." [1] Chafe as we may against the author's odd hesitation – actually, this overdetermined simile is the opposite of weird – their analogy gets at something true precisely to the degree that it threatens to collapse into a literal description of the game's contents.



For *Bloodborne* is of course full of beautifully wrought objects. Even beyond its own iconic timepieces – the enormous, ornate clocktowers whose deep chimes resound throughout Yharnam and the Hunter's Nightmare – the game presents a veritable workshop of wonders, surprising us time and again with exquisite clockwork contraptions, the gorgeous trick weapons, whose "precisely-machined" pieces do indeed "click and glide into each other perfectly." Has any game so lavishly rendered the look and sound of intricate metal components rotating, shifting, and locking solidly into place? These transforming tools, able to alternate between two forms at the tap of a button – sword and hammer, cane and whip, mace and buzzsaw – are themselves *Bloodborne*'s proverbial secret weapon, a perfect marriage of aesthetics and function (of audiovisual rendering and ludic design) that enables a degree of flashiness in combat unmatched in any other Souls game, while also allowing one to look and feel, for lack of a better phrase, like a total fucking badass. (As Rich Stanton rightly notes, the way your character shifts mid-combo between the two modes of Ludwig's Holy Blade – a silver longsword that transforms into a hulking greatsword by locking into its metal scabbard with a satisfying clank – "has more flair than entire other games.")[2]

Yet the comparison to an antique clock feels apt not just because these tools are so finely wrought. They also manage, unlike most other video game "loot," to possess an aura of genuine rarity and preciousness – qualities that must be understood both in a "vulgar," market-based sense, and on a more conceptual level of pure design. Certainly, it helps that these items often command a high price within the game's economy. Unlike the other Souls games, where even a legendary spear of the gods is worth only a pittance at the local merchant, and where for every unique

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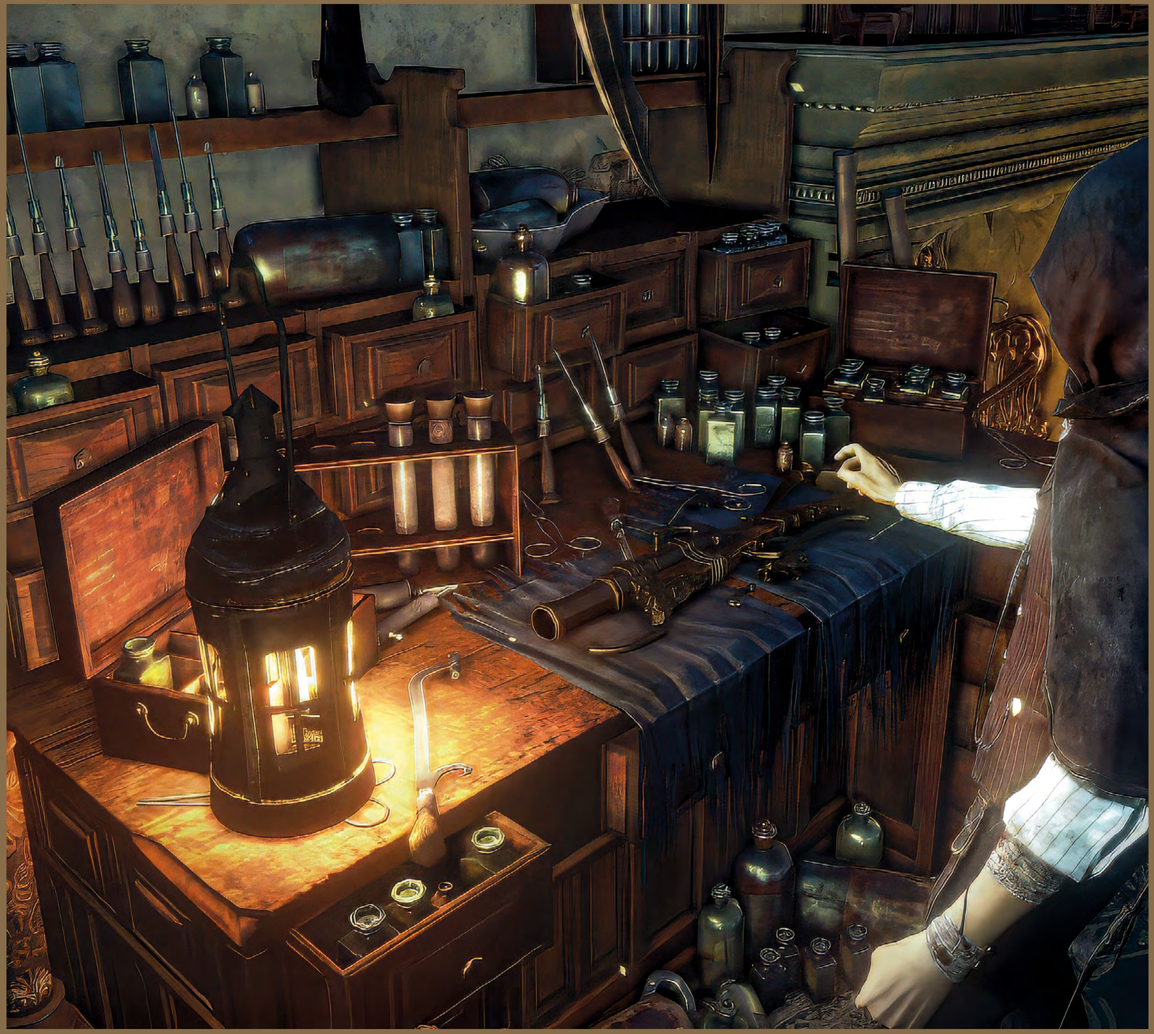
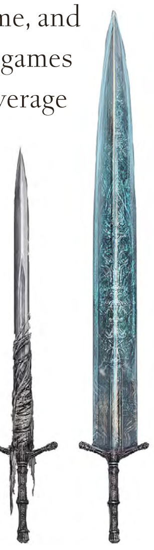
[1] See *IGN*'s "The Best Games of the Decade (2010-2019)."
[2] See Stanton's review of *Bloodborne* for *Eurogamer*.



armament one must sort through a pile of generic Daggers, Clubs, and Broadswords worth even less, most of *Bloodborne*'s trick weapons can be exchanged for a sizeable haul of the game's currency, and buying them back from the merchant – in the not-infrequent case of seller's remorse – requires an even higher sum. Yet such prices never feel exorbitant. As the signature weapons of the elite Hunters, their status as prized, uncommon works of craftsmanship is well established in the story, and it's further affirmed by the game's reward structure, where the designers have made the wise choice to decouple these items from randomized, repeated "loot drops," and to place each model instead in a single, unique location, thus granting even the low- and mid-tier models an air of market scarcity. This rarity is itself rare. In an age when many popular action games boast industrial-scale armories composed of a handful of graphical assets endlessly repeated or re-skinned with slightly different attributes or stats, *Bloodborne*'s trick weapons, each of which appears only once in the game, with an entirely unique animated model, feel positively auratic.

Still, if the trick weapons seem almost akin to luxury items in this sense, it is a luxury divorced from its usual social context as well as from any expenditure of actual capital on the player's part. If it possesses any real economic implications whatsoever – and this is far from assured – they bear primarily on the developers, who have gone the unusual length of producing unique graphical assets and effects for every trick weapon, despite the fact that many of them will never be seen by the average player and thus would constitute, according to the dominant logic of the games industry today, a wasted expense. Such detailed "hand-crafting," applied so freely toward the representation of these hand-crafted tools that mirror it, may indeed raise questions about actual corporate budgets, if not actual labor. These questions, however, would necessarily depend on conjectures about how money, time, and labor were and could have been allocated (certainly, the Souls games cut graphical corners in many other areas relative to the average blockbuster), and thus the most we can say with certainty is that *Bloodborne* scorns thriftiness *in this one respect*: a rare, unique item will actually feel rare and unique. (Perhaps no tool is more marvelous than the Holy Moonlight Sword, a hidden superweapon whose beautiful, shimmering waves of blue-green light are conveyed through a particle effect that is, to my knowledge, replicated *nowhere else in the game* – a feat of pure graphical indulgence that feels more luxurious than anything in the far more technically opulent works of Naughty Dog or Guerrilla.) As virtual assets contained in a mass-produced technological commodity, *Bloodborne*'s trick weapons nevertheless resemble artisanal objects.



They are also – in keeping with the clock metaphor – objects bearing a history. This is something they share with all items in the Souls universe. The narrative method of the series might be described as archaeological: in each game, one pieces together the details of a different historical catastrophe from these literal pieces found scattered across the world. Like artifacts from a dead culture, these items train us to ask not just about their intrinsic function and history (communicated through short, fragmentary descriptions visible in the inventory menu) but also about their pure spatial context, about why they are found *here* rather than anywhere else, and they usually reward us with answers that, if not always satisfying or illuminating, at least seem to indicate an unusual degree of thoughtfulness on the designers' part. The story of *Bloodborne* in particular is one often told through objects and their placement in space. We can learn, for instance, about Lady Maria's crisis of faith – the turning point that may have precipitated the development of Yharnam's famed healing blood itself – by discovering

ONE PIECES TOGETHER THE DETAILS OF A DIFFERENT HISTORICAL CATASTROPHE FROM THESE LITERAL PIECES FOUND SCATTERED ACROSS THE WORLD. LIKE ARTIFACTS FROM A DEAD CULTURE THESE ITEMS REWARD US WITH ANSWERS

her elegant Rakuyo weapon at the bottom of a well in the Fishing Hamlet, where she cast it aside in a fit of remorse. Likewise, finding the enigmatic One Third of Umbilical Cord item in the Abandoned Old Workshop is what tips us off to the eldritch origins of the Hunter's Dream. At times, item placement will even add up to a genuine narrative relation. Consider the fate of Doctor Iosefka, the kindly NPC who aids the player during the game's opening hours before being replaced by an evil doppelganger. If you speak to Iosefka through her locked door early in the game, she will offer you a Iosefka's Blood Vial – a stronger, unique variety of the basic health-restoring Blood Vials found all over the city. Returning to her clinic after the False Iosefka usurps her place, however, adds an unfortunate sequel to this exchange. For upon entering the closed-off portion of the clinic through a secret entrance in the Forbidden Woods, the player will find one room occupied by a non-aggressive Celestial Emissary creature who, upon death, drops a single Iosefka's Blood Vial – thus wordlessly revealing that this harmless alien is all that remains of the real Iosefka. This moment is emblematic. In a world in which narrative itself is scarce, Souls items – even the diegetically or functionally worthless ones – possess an uncommon value, both as narratively significant objects and as labor products of an artisanal attention that has bestowed upon them precisely this significance. The aura of preciousness belonging to *Bloodborne*'s trick weapons thus transfigures into literal economic terms the unusual narrative value of Souls items as such.

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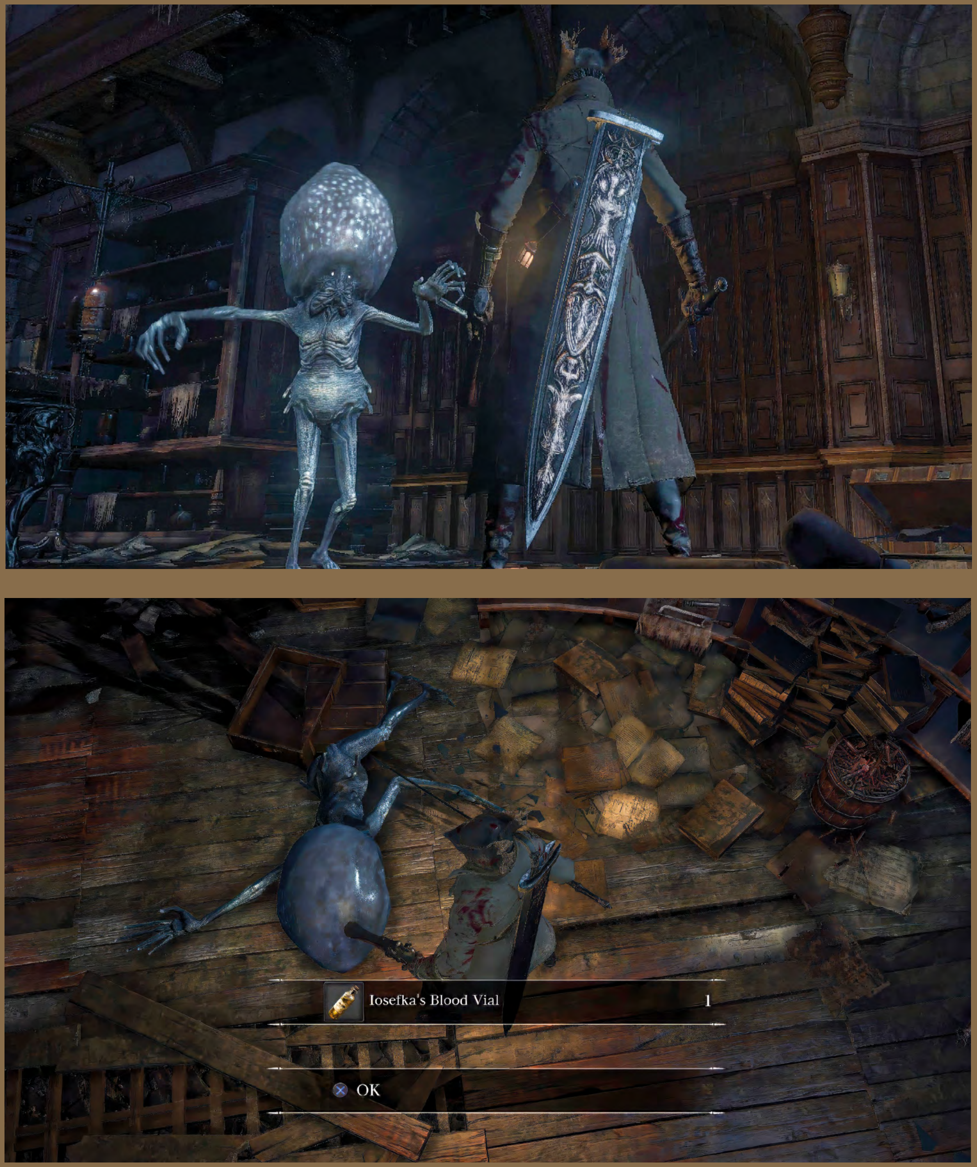
All of this, however, only makes it more confounding when, near the very end of *Bloodborne*, just before the elevator leading to your climactic encounter with Mergo and their deadly Wet Nurse, you



In typically economical fashion, *Bloodborne* reveals the fate of the "real" Doctor Iosefka purely through the placement of an item: the player can acquire her signature blood vial by killing the Celestial Emissary that appears in her clinic.

open a prominently placed treasure chest only to receive – another Iosefka's Blood Vial. This moment flies in the face of the Souls games' considered approach to item placement. As a doctor of the Healing Church, Iosefka would seem to have no relation to the dreamworld of the Nightmare of Mensis. That her signature item is found here thus stands as an aggressive affront to the narrative purposefulness this same item formerly emblematized. This dissonance is exacerbated by the mismatch between the "form" of this reward and its content: itself an unusual object in *Bloodborne*, the treasure chest primes us for something especially valuable – one last power-up before the final boss – only to disappoint with an item that, though rare, is barely useful this late in the game. Indeed, the basic physical fact of this blood vial being housed in a chest is puzzling in its own right. Not only is the vial in no way a treasure – it's almost functionally identical to the game's most common, mass-produced item, and furthermore can't be sold – but, at the risk of taking the gameworld too literally, it's also far too *small* to an object to constitute the sole contents of a heavy chest without raising the suspicion that a joke is being played somewhere. All of that buildup for this? The vial is so incongruous that it seems almost like a placeholder, like a random token the designers put in the chest to represent an as-yet undecided final reward that was never swapped out for the real thing. Even as a potential placeholder, however, it seems perfectly chosen to evoke confusion: it's hard to think of a single item that would be more difficult to justify either narratively or functionally. Even replacing the vial with *Bloodborne*'s most worthless item – a Pebble – would be less disconcerting, since this would sharpen the anticlimax itself into an obvious gag (no doubt played by the wily Mensis Scholars, whose goofy experiments in splicing dogs and birds have already occasioned one of the game's biggest laughs), while similarly, replacing it with something *wholly* random – say, a Knight's Wig – would merely amplify the unhinged, topsy-turvy atmosphere that the Nightmare of Mensis already cultivates. As it stands, the blood vial is not useful or unique enough to be rewarding, and yet just special enough – the item description explicitly calls it a "rare blood vial" – to seem like an intentional choice. But this choice defies explanation. At once narratively dissonant and devoid of value (whether practical, aesthetic, or economic), the vial contradicts at one stroke both the diegetic significance and the aura of preciousness that define *Bloodborne*'s rare items everywhere else. No wonder, then, that some have found its presence disturbing. In the normally exhaustive *Bloodborne* Wiki at Fextralife, the page for Iosefka's Blood Vial lists a few theories for why this item is found in the Nightmare of Mensis before conceding: "Ultimately, there is no concrete proof for the theories about why the vial is there, but many believe that Miyazaki would not have placed it there without having a purpose lore-wise."[3]

Nevertheless, when seen from another angle the blood vial's very arbitrariness appears fitting. For whatever its intended meaning – and contra the Miyazaki faithful, I'm skeptical that there is one – the functional emptiness of this treasure chest beautifully models the narrative fate of the rare and precious item that your character has sought from the very beginning: Paleblood. The shadow of *Bloodborne*'s original prize thus appears one last time on the precipice of the Hunt's completion. Mere moments before being erased for good by its structural usurper within *Bloodborne*'s plot – the Moon Presence, or Paleblood II,

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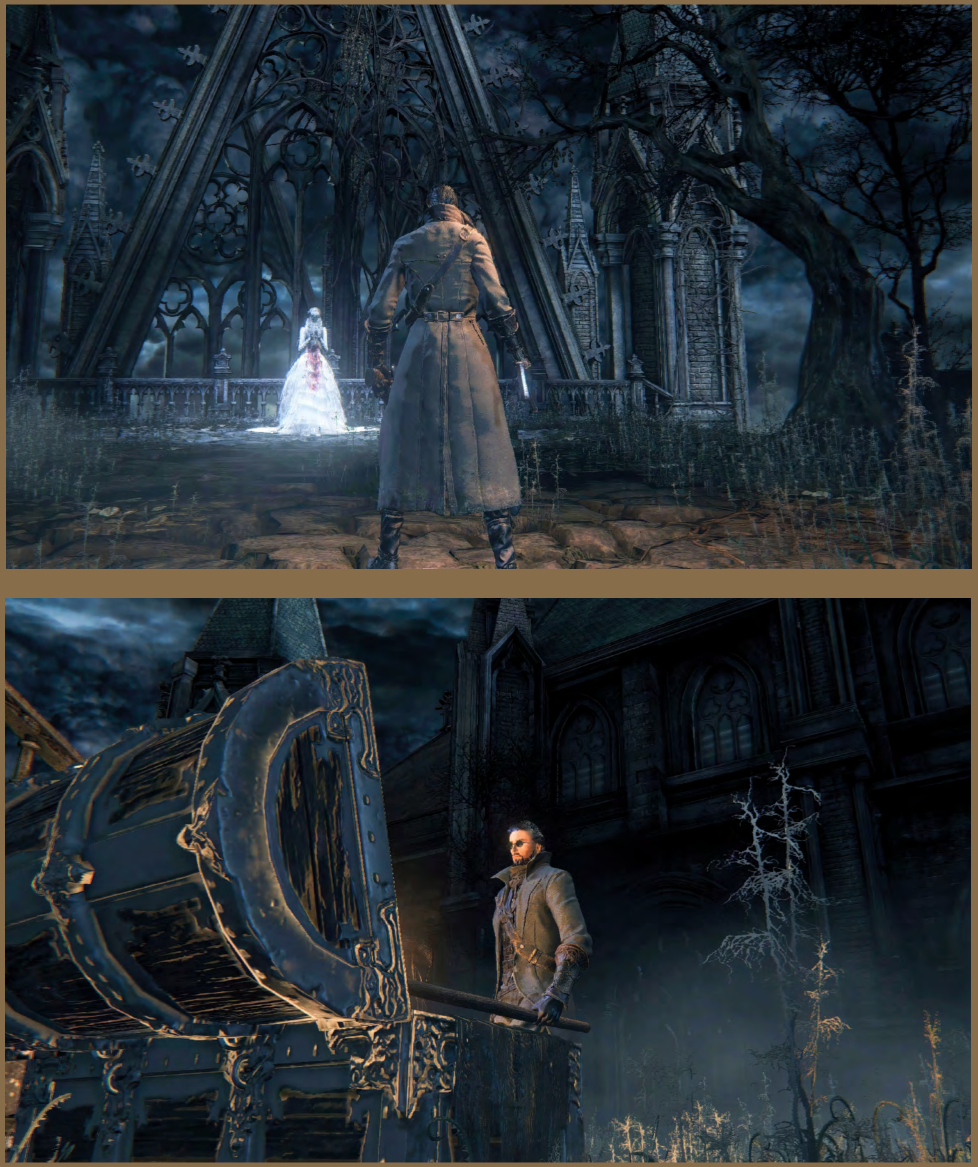
[3] *Bloodborne* Wiki (Fextralife), "Iosefka's Blood Vial," last modified March 12, 2023 (accessed August 20, 2024), https://bloodborne.wiki.fextralife.com/Iosefka's+Blood+Vial.



Bloodborne does an exceptional job of making its weapons and treasures seem valuable, meaningful, and unique. But the reward you receive from the game's final treasure chest – found mere moments before the last required boss – is bafflingly useless and incongruous.

who at last reveals themselves in the flesh when the player returns to the Hunter's Dream after killing Mergo – here the story's first, forgotten Paleblood receives a final send-off in the form of a belated physical manifestation that lays bare its essence as a narrative dead end. A quintessential MacGuffin (a plot device whose canonical examples include so many functionally empty containers), this original Paleblood materializes not as an obtainable item in its own right (for it's in no way identical with Iosefka's Blood Vial itself), but rather as a negative *relation* between an archetypal sign of narrative desire – the treasure chest or proverbial "mystery box" – and an arbitrary, meaningless, and ultimately valueless content. It is, in other words, precisely the disproportion between the outer form of this treasure and what's inside that expresses the truth: the rare blood we have been seeking since waking up in Iosefka's Clinic was, indeed, nothing other than a placeholder. Does such self-reflexivity justify the narrative contradiction of placing Iosefka's Blood Vial where it could never be, or the game-design sin or giving the player such a lame prize for traversing *Bloodborne*'s last level? Probably not. But it nonetheless stands as a final testament to the way that *Bloodborne*'s exquisite craftsmanship coexists, oddly harmoniously, with a certain brokenness and incompletion. It is telling that in this most clock-like of games the actual clocks no longer work.

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CHAPTER 17

On Death

CHAPTER 17

Since their inception, action games seeking to tell a traditional story have been bedeviled by a pair of related problems stemming from the medium's structural relation to death. On the one hand, there is the fact that in nearly all such games, the player's death – the very model of singularity and unrepeatability in real life – becomes a repeated event par excellence.

In any given action game, the protagonist can be expected to die any number of times, in an infinitely extendable series of false narrative termini that are, perversely, granted a vivid representational reality (typically, we see the hero fall to their death, get crushed, bleed out, suffer decapitation, etc.) only to be revoked after the fact, in an obvious violation of traditional narrative logic, as events that "did not really happen." This fundamental contradiction has been baked into the medium since the first time Mario plummeted to his death only to reappear on the screen, and attempts to motivate it narratively – as in the recent vogue for time-loop games in which dying causes the protagonist to actually relive the same scenarios over and over – merely do so by doubling it, with in all its inherent artifice intact, on the level of diegetic reality. Such games do not so much solve the contradiction as successfully ask the question, "What if life worked like a game?" [1]

On the other hand, the action game's essential conjoining of death and repetition causes narrative problems even when the protagonist's life is not the one in play. For in this kill-or-be-killed universe the flipside too has been known to raise eyebrows. The formally mandated slaughter of untold enemies, the only way to stave off one's own death in any game that revolves around combat, poses a severe challenge to realistic characterization by obliging the protagonist not just to commit violent acts as such – one or two of which, even moralists will admit, are happily licensed within many narrative genres – but, far more seriously, to repeat them ad infinitum. (A single killing, we might say, is

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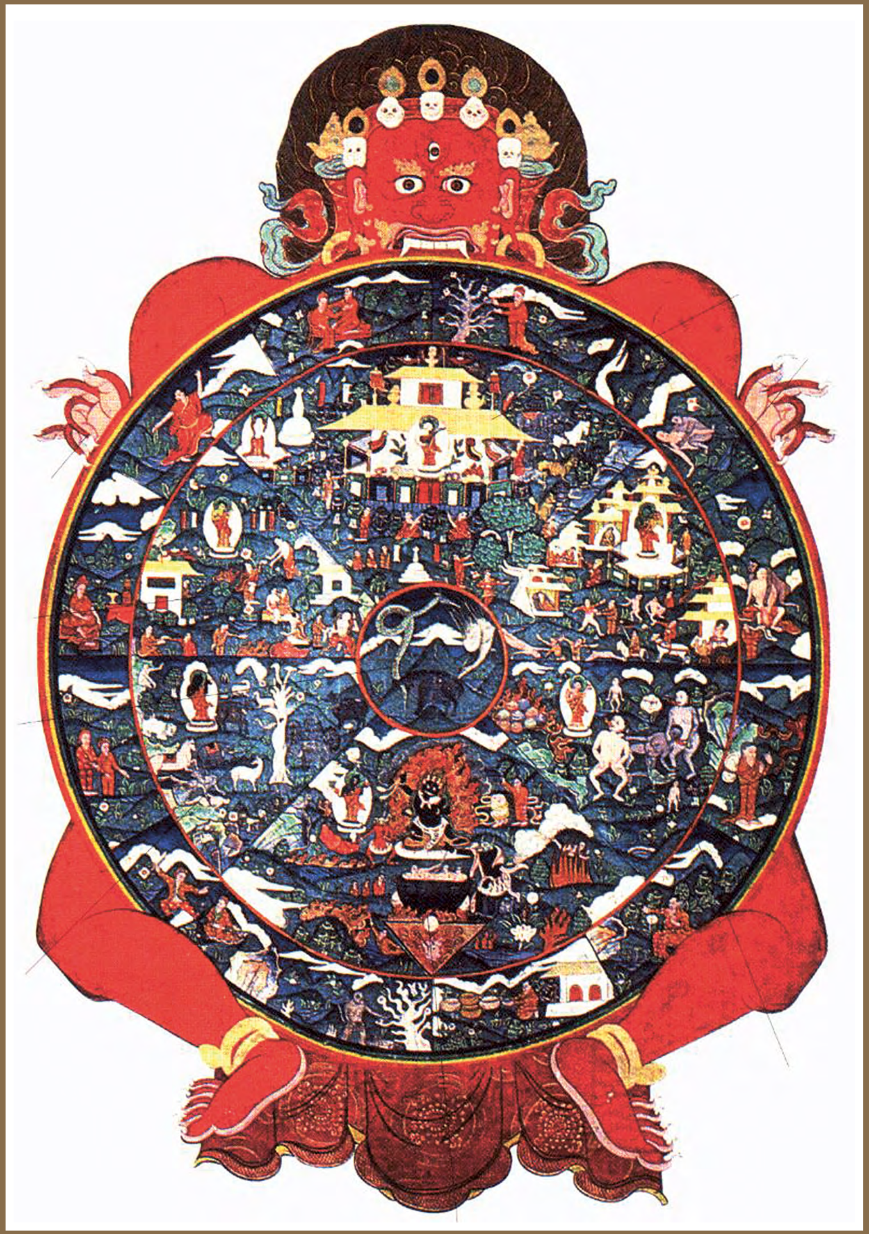
[1] I consider some recent attempts to motivate death and respawning through diegetic time loops in my essay "Repetition, with a Difference: On 'Deathloop.'" One of the odd things about this trend is its (quite fittingly) circular logic. Although such games often seem to take inspiration from the film *Groundhog Day*, Janet Murray observed years ago that this film already borrows its structure from that of a game (*Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, 42-43.) Narratively justifying the ludic structure of death and repetition through a *Groundhog Day*-style time loop is thus a kind of tautology.



Some versions of Buddhism hold living beings to be caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth. It's an existence not unlike that of an action-game protagonist.

THE VIDEO GAME IS A MIMESIS OF REPETITION FAR MORE EFFECTIVE THAN ANYTHING TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE CAN MUSTER

a tragedy; a thousand killings implies a fully realized combat system.) Such repetition is a structural rather than a narrative requirement. Whereas traditional narrative, in Roland Barthes's account, differs from life precisely in its general exclusion of repetition, most video games are built around repeating the same basic actions hundreds of times. [2] From jumping to climbing to driving to killing, the video game is, indeed, a mimesis of repetition far more effective than anything traditional narrative can muster, since unlike pure narrative, its repeated scenarios are able to transcend whatever storytelling redundancy they may possess by virtue of their intrinsic value as occasions for play. Yet however ludically justified – that is to say, fun – such repetition may be, when it comes to violent acts this repetitive structure clashes with realism's given models of moral and psychological health. As has often been noted, any action game wanting to grapple convincingly with the psychological experience of the hero would likely be forced – going by the typical body counts of such games – to represent them as either a psychopathic killer or a traumatized automaton of death. Such a protagonist, the thinking goes, simply cannot kill that many people and remain a normal, relatable person. Accordingly, perhaps the only narrative mode able to assimilate this repeated slaughter without strain is myth, a genre whose superhuman protagonists scorn morality and psychological motivation alike, and whose astronomical body counts on the field of battle merely heighten our appreciation for their awesome power. On one hand, *Deathloop*, on the other, *God of War*: these two titles – the former belonging to a recent game and the latter to a long-running series – together emblematize the action genre's twofold drive toward violence and repetition. For nearly every action protagonist, when taken literally, is an inhuman force of pure destruction trapped in a mysterious cycle of death and resurrection.

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[2] See note 6 to "Introduction" above.

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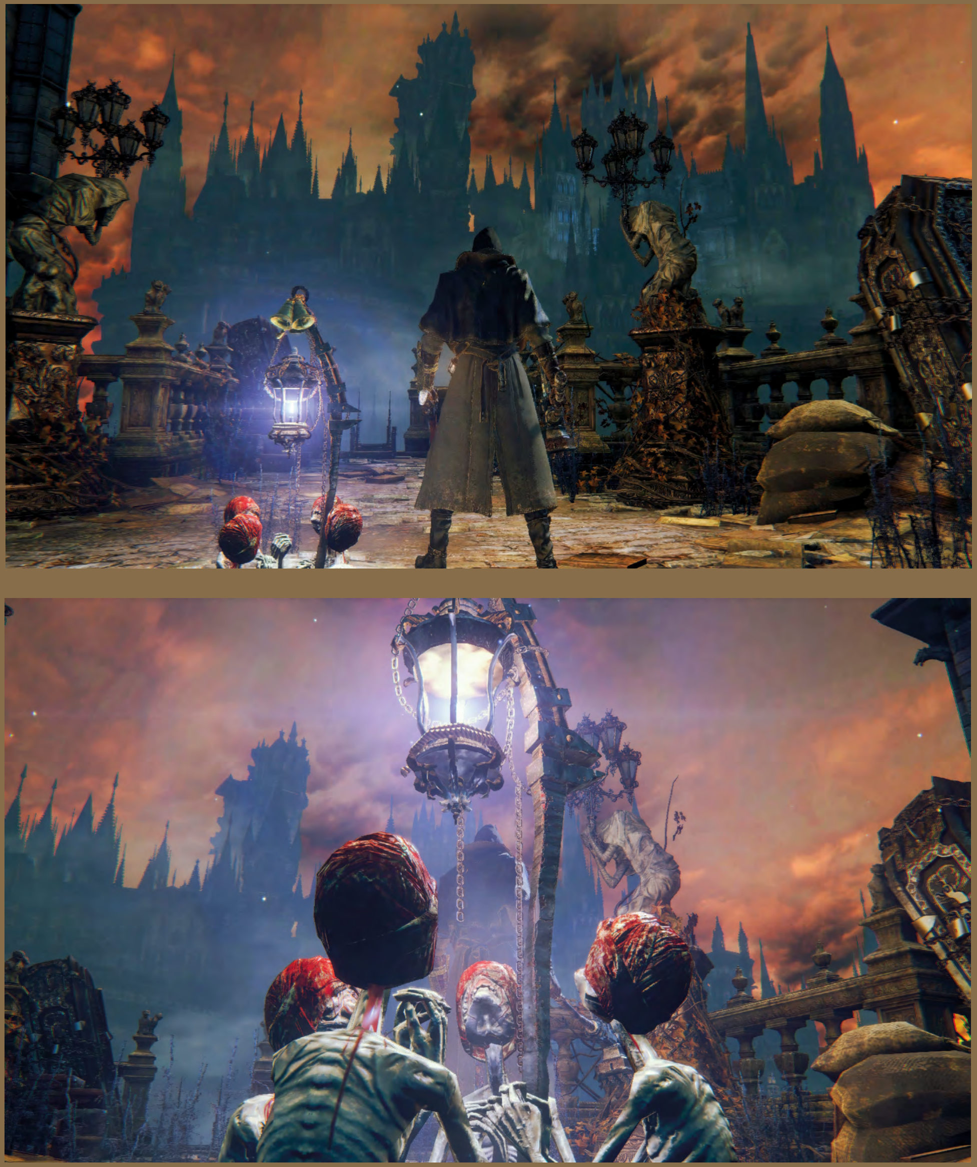
The Souls games bear an interesting relation to this narrative problem. Perhaps no other series thematizes death and repetition so relentlessly, thus grounding both the player's repeated deaths and their endless killing within the fictional world. And yet in Souls this motivation of the games' own ludic form seems at once unnecessary (since their stories are already fragmentary, contradictory, and indeed mythic by design) and weirdly incomplete. In *Dark Souls*, for instance, it's explicitly established that all the world's denizens have been afflicted with a curse that makes them unable to die. On a practical level, this explains why your own character, like most video game protagonists, is functionally immortal, as well as why your enemies likewise revive whenever you do, returning to their fixed posts and patrols across Lordran and waiting patiently for another go-round. Yet for all its ludonarrative convenience, the lore of the Undead Curse nevertheless leaves unexplained the Souls games' most distinctive form of repetition: the fact that enemies return to life not just when you die, but whenever you *rest* or otherwise interact, safely, with the magical bonfires scattered across the world. It is doubtless this mechanic, which transforms the entire interactive world into a kind of clock that you may unwind and reset at will, that defines the gratuitously reiterative temporality of these games, and makes them appear as thematic explorations not just of death and rebirth but of repetition as such. But the diegetic motivation behind this bewildering equivalence – *whereby dying and resting at a bonfire produce the same regression in the world's state* – is left entirely up to the player. Certainly, there are clues that one can arrange into a compelling interpretation. One will note, for instance, that the bonfires are the common denominator between these two recursive processes – your own resurrection always occurs at the last one you visited – which may imply that the Undead Curse is merely one instance of a larger existential rupture rooted in the bonfires themselves. When we add that Lordran's current crisis can be traced to the weakening of its spacetime-structuring cosmic core – the First Flame – then a possible link between fire and repetition within the *Dark Souls* cosmos starts to become clear. Perhaps the Undead Curse is in truth nothing like the zombiehood it otherwise resembles in its victims, but rather a kind of mass temporal distortion produced by these minor emanations of the First Flame, which act as localized temporal anchors perpetually drawing nearby entities into earlier states of being whether they will it or not. Yet this explanation, though satisfying in some respects and, I think, fully authorized by the fiction, only leads to more questions. For why then is your character seemingly the only one able to reset the world by interacting with a bonfire? If, as the fiction implies, there are other beings out there who possess the same abilities as your avatar, then why don't you repeatedly suffer abrupt reversions to previous temporal states while going about your day – as we must assume the world's other denizens frequently do – whenever someone else touches a bonfire or dies? Unlike with the

previous question, moreover, in this case the game provides no hint toward resolving the enigma. *Dark Souls* motivates its ludic structures of repetition only to a certain point: its much-lauded ludonarrative harmony merely produces dissonance at a higher order.

Bloodborne, meanwhile, pushes the theme of repetition even further. For not only does it preserve the entire ludic structure of location-based resurrection and resetting from *Dark Souls* (with the dream lanterns subbed in for bonfires), but it also layers on explicit cycles of repetition within the story. The Hunt, we're told, has taken place countless times; blood-drunk Hunters sent to the Hunter's Nightmare are doomed to repeat their experiences forever; the immortal Queen Annalise, for whose flesh "time flows in reverse," can be revived from death any number of times; while the blood moon implies that Yharnam itself is frozen in temporal stasis. Finally, and most unusually, *Bloodborne* foregrounds *itself* as an object of repetition, through a trio of endings suggesting in different ways that your avatar's repeat-journey through Yharnam in New Game Plus – a normally unmotivated RPG convention that, here as in the rest of the Souls series, automatically begins as soon as you finish the game – is "really happening" within the fictional world. These endings now deserve a closer look.

* * *

Like the other Souls games, *Bloodborne* offers a selection of final cutscenes – all of them extremely short and ambiguous – depending on the player's actions. Here the key decision happens at the very end. Upon returning to the Hunter's Dream after killing Mergo, Gehrman commends the player for completing their quest, and as a reward, offers to "show you mercy" by executing your avatar within the Hunter's Dream, thus severing your connection to the nightmare realm and allowing you to "awake under the morning sun" freed from all further obligations as a Hunter.



Bloodborne's Dream Lanterns revive fallen enemies and restore broken objects whenever the player uses them to warp to and from the Hunter's Dream. Should we understand this process as repetition through time or as reversion to an earlier state of existence?

At this point the player can decide, via a dialogue menu, either to Submit Your Life or to Refuse. Selecting the former ends the game immediately. Gehrman beheads your avatar, and you are next shown awakening in the "real" Yharnam to a beautiful sunrise amid chiming cathedral bells, while back in the Hunter's Dream the Doll kneels in prayer by your tombstone. Selecting "Refuse," meanwhile, leads to a final duel with Gehrman that ends in one of two outcomes. In most cases (especially if the player has neglected to use a guide), the game will conclude with your avatar being installed by force as Gehrman's replacement: upon his death, the Moon Presence descends from the sky and grabs your character as the screen fades to black. We then see the Doll pushing your avatar in Gehrman's wheelchair through the Hunter's Dream, before kneeling beside you and announcing the beginning of a new cycle: "And so, the hunt begins again." If, however, the player refuses Gehrman's offer after consuming three copies of the rare One Third of Umbilical Cord item, their encounter with the Moon Presence unfolds differently. Inflamed with eldritch Insight, your avatar resists the Moon Presence's embrace, and instead confronts it in the game's secret final boss fight. Slaying it then leads to a perpetuation of a different sort. In the strangest of the game's endings, your character is shown having been transformed into an infant Great One, as if to imply that your final destiny is to assume not Gehrman's place but rather that of the Moon Presence itself as the eldritch master of the Hunter's Dream.

One will immediately note that these latter two endings – both of which follow the player's refusal of Gehrman's offer – perform the typical Souls move of motivating a ludic structure of repetition (in this case, the entirety of the Hunt itself), but only incompletely. Both endings imply that the cycle will continue with your avatar now occupying a different structural role: in Vladimir Propp's terms, either that of the Helper (Gehrman) or the Villain (the Moon Presence). And yet in both cases the actual repetition that follows – the replay mode of New Game Plus that begins immediately after the credits no matter how many times in a row you finish the game – is an imperfect match, since, as a simple repetition of the game whose only changes lie in porting-over your character's final level and gear and strengthening all enemies accordingly, it again places you in the role of Hero while Gehrman and the Moon Presence reprise their respective narrative functions. It's thus not quite accurate to say that these endings motivate the represented *content* of New Game Plus, which sees your character retrace their steps through Yharnam while outfitted, nonsensically, with items and weapons gathered from locations that they have not yet visited within this particular story cycle. Rather, what these endings motivate is the experience of total repetition in itself. Like a teacher vigorously miming the actions that their pupil must replicate, they model the full-scale reprisal of *Bloodborne* that the game then initiates formally. Your own character may not actually be the one reliving the experiences that *Bloodborne*'s ideal player is now asked to relive, but the cyclicality suggested by each ending produces a purely structural continuity that carries over into New Game Plus regardless. Whether in "your" universe or a different one, all of this must happen again.

The curse of repetition implied in these two endings – for, following the model of *Dark Souls*, we should indeed understand them as "bad" – thus produces an unusual formal harmony with New Game Plus despite the obvious discontinuities between them. By contrast, it is characteristic of *Bloodborne* that the "good" ending leads to absolute structural discordance. To begin, we must note the perversity of the decision that unlocks this ending in the first place. Although accepting Gehrman's offer is fully incentivized in the story – isn't freedom from the Dream what any reasonable person would want? – such a choice flies in the face of the normal structural imperatives of a game like *Bloodborne*. Indeed, *Bloodborne* breaks a basic law of game design by making its best ending the one obtainable with the least effort. It's not just that players have been conditioned to expect that whatever extra work they put in by uncovering secrets or overcoming additional challenges will be met with consequent narrative rewards. (Such, in fact, accurately describes the choice between the previous two Refusal endings: by seeking out the ultra-rare Umbilical Cords one gets to live the next cycle a god rather than a custodian.) For accepting Gehrman's offer constitutes a far greater affront to narrative closure than the quite normal practice of passing on additional "endgame content" geared toward completionists. Rather, to Submit Your Life means precisely to *short-circuit the game* by foregoing its final battle. Chopping off your head also chops off *Bloodborne*'s climax: we're talking about a flagrant violation of narrative and ludic pacing, one so severe that it's easy to imagine an unknowing player choosing this option and responding with legitimate outrage when the credits roll. Simply put, very few first-time players – save those who are utterly sick of *Bloodborne* (utterly sick of the Dream) and, having come this far, desperately seek an authorized way out – will choose this option while being aware of the consequences. [3] On a gameplay level, the player is thus heavily incentivized to act against their avatar's best interests. If the basic facts of the story prod you toward accepting Gehrman's offer, all the norms of gameplay progression and narrative structure alike insist that you succumb, within the story's explicit logic, to the mad lust for ever more challenging things to kill (i.e., to the very pleasure of playing *Bloodborne*) that, as Gehrman regretfully notes, does indeed get

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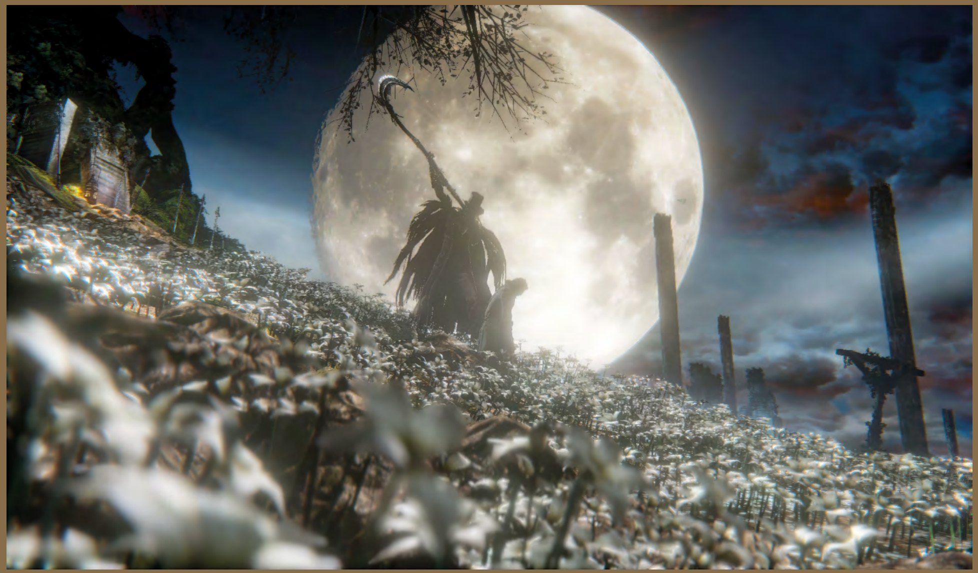
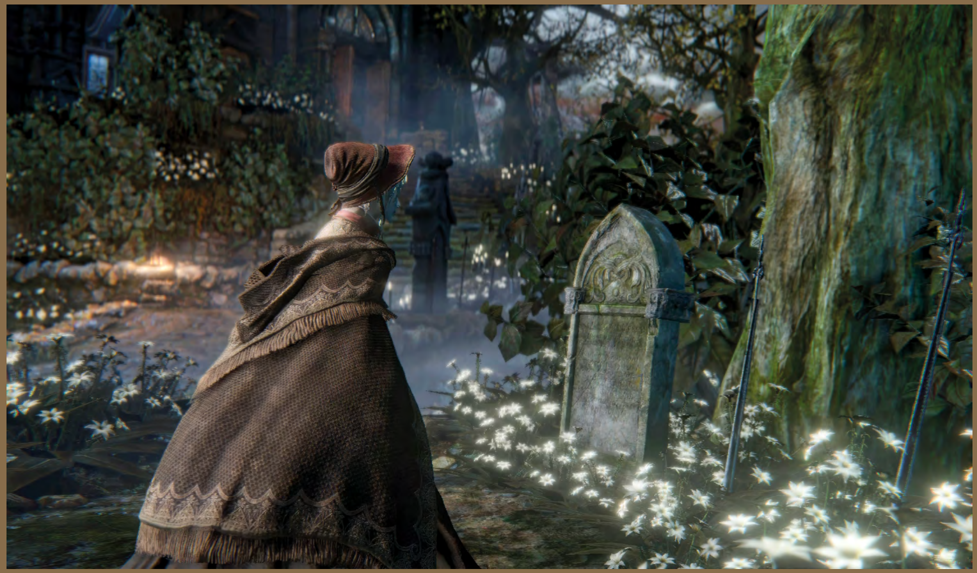
[3] *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* uses a "corrected" version of this structure: there it is the perverse narrative choice—and consequently the "bad" ending—that short-circuits the game, allowing you to roll credits without visiting the final few areas and fighting the true last boss.

the better of his Hunters from time to time.

Nevertheless, the internal tension of this exchange – a structurally bad ending for a narratively good one – still pales in comparison to that produced on the plot level by the contents of the good ending itself. For the very happiness of this conclusion, which ostensibly sees your character break the cycle of the Hunt, places it in a uniquely contradictory relation to New Game Plus. If your character has really escaped the Dream, then why do you still find yourself right back at the beginning of the game after the credits, just the same as if you'd refused Gehrman's offer? Doubtless, this wouldn't strike us as problematic if the other two endings did not so strongly imply a repetition of the Hunt. (When New Game Plus begins in *Dark Souls* or *Sekiro*, one doesn't feel that this classic gameplay mechanic needs to be justified diegetically.) But in *Bloodborne* the good ending is a striking outlier in this respect: here the better outcome for your avatar comes precisely at the expense of the work's overall coherence.

At the same time, this ending is dissonant not only with the larger mechanic of New Game Plus, but also with itself. For despite asserting your avatar's escape from the Hunt, it also prompts you to experience the *proof* of that escape retroactively, during yet another cycle of the Hunt. This is the main effect of the brief epilogue, which sees the Doll kneeling by your gravestone in the Hunter's Dream and repeating the line she utters every time you conclude an interaction with her during gameplay: "Farewell, good hunter. May you find your worth in the waking world." At first this scene poses no problem. With your link to the Dream severed, you are indeed dead to its immortal inhabitants; and as one of the few Hunters to have successfully completed a Hunt, you are certainly worthy of commemoration. But the fact that the Doll honors your seemingly unrepeatable death by repeating a line she has already spoken countless times





should give us a clue that the supposed singularity of this ending's outcome may be something of a ruse. And in fact, upon beginning New Game Plus after accepting Gehrman's offer, one will notice that the tombstone at which the Doll was shown praying *is now present in the Hunter's Dream* – an environmental change that, as the only postgame alteration to the gameworld in all of *Bloodborne*, could not imply more strongly that the ending we just viewed "really happened" within the storyworld of your current journey. The Doll herself even testifies to this explicitly if you talk to her near the tombstone. "This grave," she says, "stands in memory of a hunter I once knew. Though enchanted by the dream, [he/she] remained strong, and eventually saw the light of dawn. I pray that you've found meaning, and comfort, in the waking world." (The ambiguous second-person pronoun in her last sentence crystallizes the narrative confusion of the scenario: if we understand her addressee as your avatar in this moment then the sentence makes no sense, while if we understand it as the absent version of your avatar who has escaped into the "waking world," then we're forced to conclude that there are two of you.) You thus break free of the loop only to stand before your own grave as a prisoner once more of the same cycle. This paradox, moreover, should not be taken merely to indicate the good ending's hidden continuity with New Game Plus, as if the game were really saying that your death and awakening were a lie and that you were always doomed to repeat the Hunt no matter what. On the contrary, the gravestone and its related dialogue manifest a genuine ambivalence: in the very act of asserting the incontrovertible reality of your permanent death, they also establish the diegetic reality of the *current* cycle, which can no longer be imagined as a purely formal replay mode devoid of narrative significance. Confirming the good ending's authenticity also contradicts it outright. [4]

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It would seem, then, that there is no escape from repetition. And amid all this talk of endings, one might wonder whether in this universe ending as such is even possible. But here *Bloodborne*, along with all the other Souls games, demands a final qualification. For it remains a distinctive feature of these works that their perpetual repetition is in no way opposed to finality. On the contrary, although in them one finds the gaming medium's constitutive deathloops given free reign like nowhere else, they are still the only high-profile, single-player RPG series in which the player is forced to experience something like actual finitude.

This is due to a systemic wrinkle that, though often under-discussed in Souls commentary, in fact forms the secret heart of the series' design, the foundation of both its fun and its power. Despite their endless loops, the Souls games' radical save system, which abolishes manual saving and loading in favor of a constant autosave that operates beyond the player's control, means that nothing important can ever be undone, and no temporal juncture can ever be re-lived. Here the gaming medium's true god of repetition – the *user*, who, occupying the supra-diegetic plane of pure systemic manipulation, is normally allowed to save and reload whenever they wish, to test both sides of any decision, to undo mistakes, or simply to relive their favorite moments within a given playthrough – is stripped

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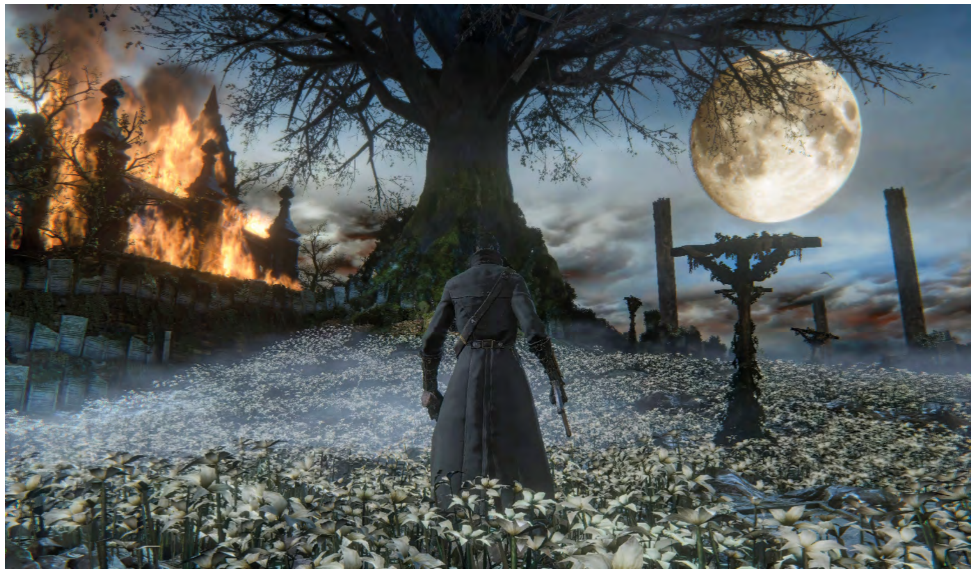
[4] Hoedt notes this paradox in her analysis of *Bloodborne*'s endings, which largely accords with mine: "The existence of New Game Plus, which allows players to delve right back into Bloodborne's campaign, nullifies the outcome of the original narrative, instead drawing attention to the endless repetition of Yharnam's night. This is acknowledged in dialogue, spoken by the Doll, following the Yharnam Sunrise ending ... Effectively, the hunter referred to [in the Doll's postgame dialogue] is the same player character who is now present in the new playthrough, creating both a repetition of the story and character, and a confusion as to their identity" (252).



When the player meets with Gehrman in the garden at *Bloodborne*'s end, they're given a choice of three possible endings, each of which implies, in different ways, a repetition of *Bloodborne* itself. The actual choice, though, is utterly singular and irrevocable – there's no way to undo it without systemically manipulating the PlaySation console.

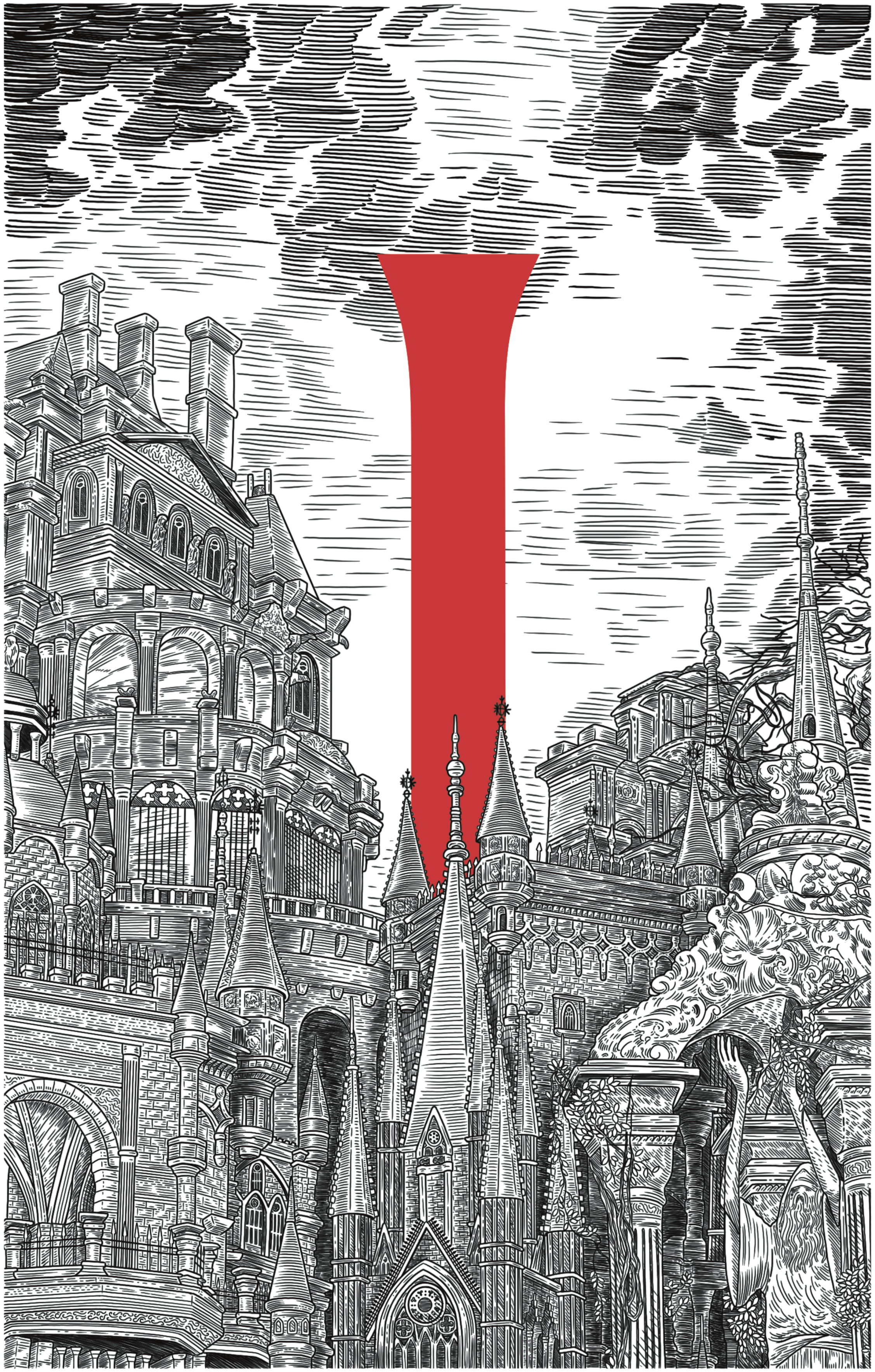
of their divine privilege, and plunged into the finitude of an existence in which actions have real consequences, and time, for all its distorted logic within the storyworld, always moves forward. Grasped in full, the sequential form of the Souls games is thus defined not by pure repetition but rather by a contrapuntal interplay between repetition and singularity. Your avatar and their enemies may be fated to kill each other ad infinitum, but this perpetual death and rebirth occurs alongside the pressing knowledge that no genuine change to the world state – whether the opening of a door, the use of an item, the smithing of a weapon, the crushing loss of your currency upon death, or, god forbid, the accidental murder of an NPC ally – can ever be reversed within a given story cycle. (If time flows backwards for Queen Annalise's flesh, the very fact that the game says this explicitly indicates that she is an exception proving the rule: the death of all other NPCs is genuinely irrevocable, not just diegetically but systemically.) For all their endless resetting and universal amnesia, these games thus have *time* as few others do – time, that is, in the way that Martin Heidegger meant it: as existential limitation. Here the event as such assumes a rare significance. Here death actually means something.

And as with death, so with endings. To view an ending in a Souls game is to experience an actual *end* – even if the cutscene itself implies eternal cyclicality – insofar as each one constitutes the permanent "death" of a given playthrough. (This is precisely why your execution in *Bloodborne*'s good ending can be so upsetting to the player who isn't expecting it.) To be sure, other games certainly harbor the potential for irreversible conclusions: one can always neglect to save. But Souls raises such irreversibility into a structural law. In each game the decision to end a playthrough has genuine stakes. Where other RPGs reject finality even in their finales, often encouraging the player to preserve a completed postgame file where one can enjoy the fruits of a fully unlocked world without the burden of narrative obligations, here there is no returning to the climax, no reloading endgame states, no wrapping up loose ends or rampaging around the map with your maxed-out avatar. When the credits roll in a Souls game, the world that you knew is gone forever. Except, that is, in *Bloodborne*'s good ending, where the only thing that remains, against all narrative logic, is the symbol of precisely this erasure. A sign of irrevocability amid endless reiteration, your grave in the Hunter's Dream thus emblematizes, in its very contradictoriness, the existential temporality of the Souls universe as a whole: no matter how many times you restart the Hunt and reset the world, you will always be one who accepted death. No ending in *Bloodborne* is more careless of narrative closure. None is more conclusive.

REMAINDER

CHAPTER 18

On the Yharnam Sunrise

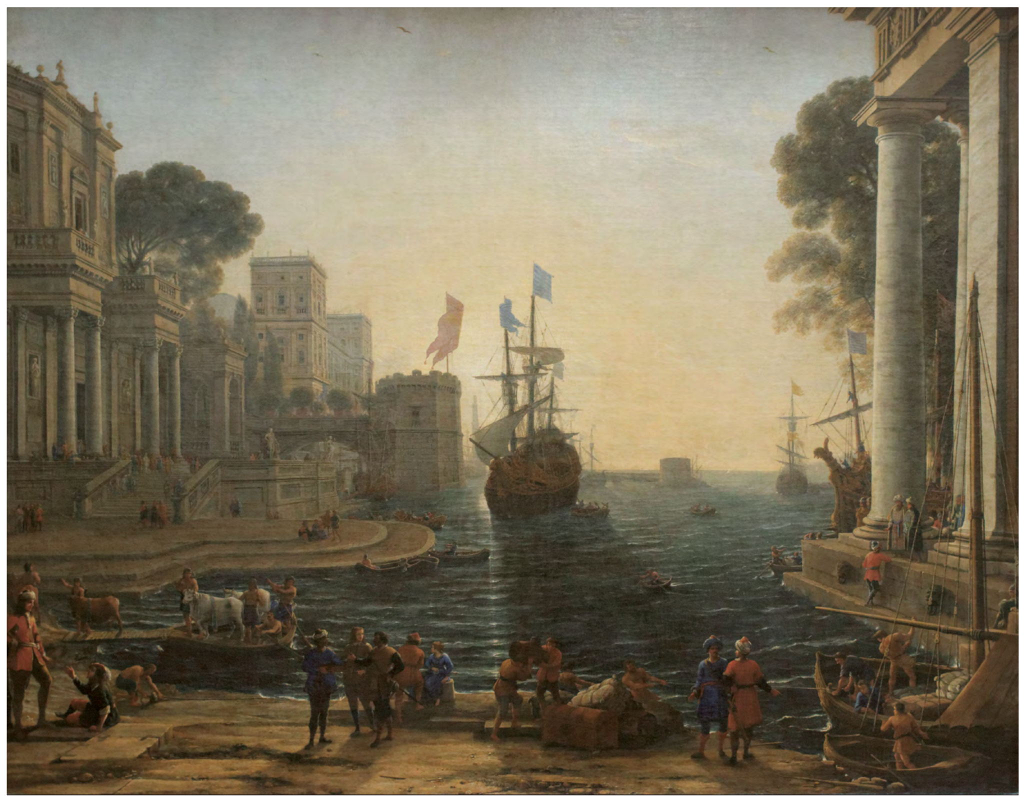


CHAPTER 18

In the last analysis, however, *Bloodborne*'s good ending – the most narratively discordant and hence, in a work so committed to negative form, the most aesthetically harmonious of all the game's endings – presents its greatest enigma during its one moment of unqualified beauty: the Yharnam sunrise itself.

Let us finally note that this brief cutscene secures the good ending's paradoxical superiority not only "for your character" but also, on a purely artistic level, for *Bloodborne* as a work. For in attesting (however temporarily) to the truth of Gehrman's promise, and in moving (however ambiguously) *Bloodborne*'s arrested chronology uniquely forward, it also awes us with a spectacle that is so surprising, so contrary to the game's dominant visual language and organizing temporal framework, that it feels like a genuine epiphany: the sight of Yharnam during the day. To be granted such a vision is almost inconceivable – indeed, I'm a little amazed that the game's graphical engine is even capable of it. It's as if *Ulysses* offered a glimpse of Leopold Bloom waking up on the morning of June 17, 1904, or as if we got to witness Odysseus, literature's prototypical seafarer, actually setting out toward that fabled land that knows nothing of the sea after his return to Ithaca. Yharnam, as well as *Bloodborne* as a whole, is simply antithetical to the daylight. To witness this dawn is thus to glimpse that radical element that lies just beyond the closure of artistic form, an absolute openness to narrative possibility that defies narrative itself.

And yet, amid this stunning image, there nevertheless remains a trace of negativity. For as your avatar heads off toward the sunrise, they are seen to stagger for no apparent reason, moving with a dazed, shambling gait that makes them resemble less a triumphant hero waking to a brilliant new day than a zombie being summoned into undeath for the fulfillment of some mindless purpose. Indeed, this way of walking closely mimics that of the undead Martyr Logarius upon his own rude awakening at the summit of Cainhurst Castle, with the main difference being that Logarius at least seems to find his footing by the cutscene's end. Is your character just in a stupor after their long Dream? Perhaps, though such a display of weakness contradicts everything shown thus far about your avatar, who seems to lack not only a sensitivity to pain but any feeling whatsoever, and whose body



Ulysses Returning Chryseis to Her Father (1644) by Claude Lorrain. Following his exploits in the Trojan War, Ulysses (Odysseus) sails home and wins back his island of Ithaca. But the *Odyssey* also suggests that he still has another journey to make, to a land far from the sea. It's his postgame content, as it were.

is never anything but a well-oiled machine perfectly responsive to the player's commands. Furthermore, a stupor implies a mental as well as physical incapacity, whereas your character, at least after the opening scene, seems utterly without interiority: to experience brain-fog you first need to have a brain. Like the verbal slip that tells us that our virtual interlocutor is a human and not a robot, this bodily failing thus seems to indicate, at the very moment of your character's disappearance, a private mental and physiological life that we never knew existed, and to which we are, and have always been, denied access. Roland Barthes calls such terminal signs of inexpressible, inaccessible meaning – a typical feature of narrative endings – *pensiveness.* [1] Here, however, the withheld content (what is your avatar feeling? where are they going? what will they do now?) is implied not through a represented act of thinking but instead through the representation of your avatar's sudden incapacity to think, from which we may negatively infer an entire inner life. Nothing in all of Souls is more humanizing – more "lifelike" – than this dumb, staggering state. Nor is anything more incompatible with the fundamentally inhuman logic of *Bloodborne.* The game's final paradox thus lies in this final suggestion of actual characterological depth. In portraying our character like a zombie, the good ending asks us – for the first and last time – to imagine them as a person.

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[1] Barthes, S/Z, 216-17.

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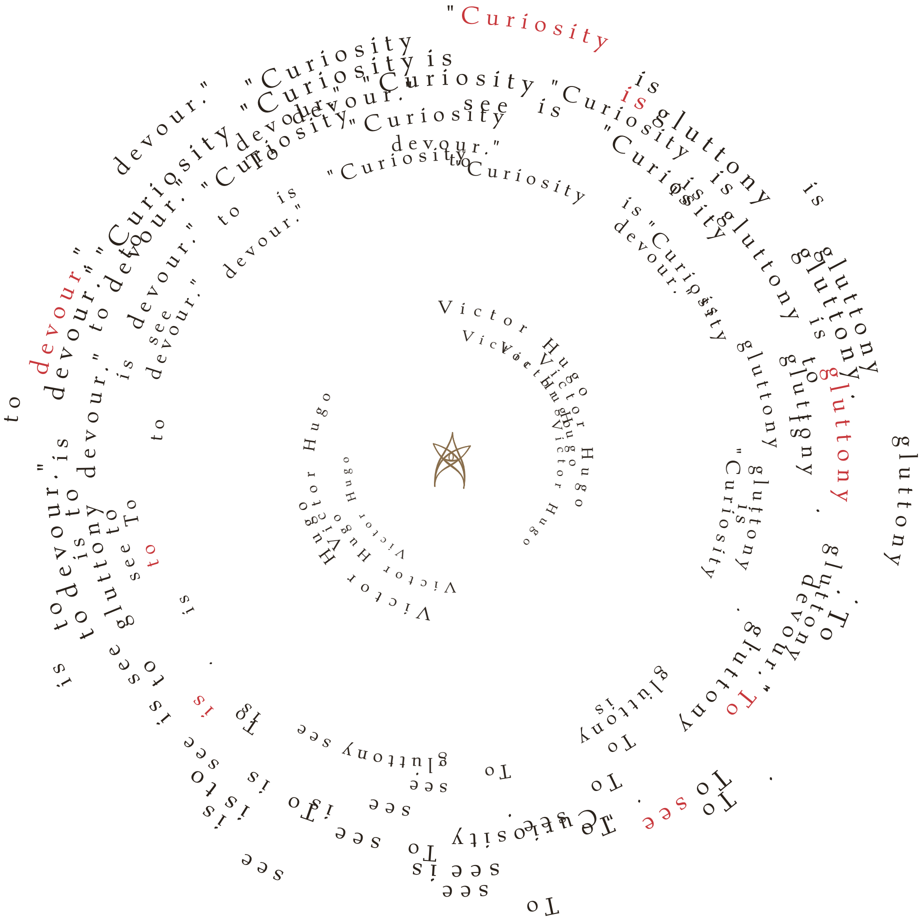
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Victor Hugo